

**STAR  
WARS**  
LEGACY'S EDGE  
THE WAITING DARK

GREGORY O. SCOTT









# INTRODUCTION

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*The Waiting Dark* is the final book of a trilogy meant to bridge the post-RotJ EU novels and Dark Horse Comics' *Legacy* series. (I hadn't planned on finished this trilogy so quickly, quarantine does wonderful things for productivity.) I wanted each long volume to do something different, even while telling an overall story, and this book is about passing the torch to some of *Legacy's* key figures. While it's set 30 years before the comics begin, it sets Roan Fel, Kol and Nat Skywalker, and other characters on the paths that lead them there. It also completes the story for other characters and let me do some original arcs that, best I know, haven't been done in a Star Wars setting. (To quote a wise man from another franchise, how we deal with death is at least as important as how we deal with life.) And because it's another long novel I wanted to bring in different sides of the rich *Star Wars* universe to make a healthy mix of Mandalorians, Hutts, and Imperials before bringing the trilogy to climax at Hapes with the age-old battle of Jedi versus Sith.

The goal of this trilogy was to bridge one slab of the EU with another. In a very direct way, *The Waiting Dark* passes the torch from last child of Han and Leia to the parents of Cade, Marasiah, and Ania. It completes the bridge.



# WHAT'S GONE BEFORE

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In the decades following the defeat of Abeloth and the Lost Tribe of the Sith, the Galactic Alliance reigned on Coruscant. The Imperial Remnant steadily democratized under the guidance of **Jagged Fel** and established its own Jedi academy under **Jaina Solo**. Their son **Arlen** became a Jedi, while **Davek** became an officer in the Imperial navy. The Jedi Order, guided by **Luke Skywalker** and later his son **Ben**, remained independent on Ossus. The Jedi quietly searched for the Mortis Dagger, a Force-imbued weapon Luke believed could kill Abeloth.

The One Sith, following the design of their sleeping master **Darth Krayt**, steadily sowed discord. In 63 ABY, they backed a coup in the Hapes Cluster. Ben's wife was killed but their daughter Jade survived and trained as a Jedi alongside **Jodram Tainer** and **Wharn**. In 75 ABY, the Sith engineered a bloody uprising in the Senex-Juvex Sectors. While it was ultimately defeated, Wharn was captured by the Sith and Ben Skywalker was killed. The Jedi chose **Lowbacca** as their new Grand Master and **Allana Solo Djo** was elected head of the Alliance.

Time passed. Davek married an Imperial Jedi named **Marasiah Valtor** and had two sons, **Vitor** and **Roan**. Arlen's partnership with Mandalorian **Tamar Skirata** was short-lived but produced a daughter, **Marin**. Jade and Jodram married and raised their own sons, **Nat** and **Kol**.

In 92 ABY, waves of barbaric invaders attacked Imperial Space and claimed many lives, including Jagged Fel's. The ambitious **Moff Veers** and **Darth Kroan** took advantage of the chaos to seize control of the Empire and purge its Jedi. Davek Fel rose to stop them, and to protect his father's legacy he declared himself Emperor. Veers and Kroan were beaten but not vanquished, and the Empire tipped into a grueling civil war.

Meanwhile the Jedi discovered the cause of the barbaric attacks: Abeloth had returned. Jade and Jodram struck a pact with a group of Sith, including **Darth Terriid**- formerly their friend Wharn. Abeloth seized Jodram's body and in his guise launched an attack

on Coruscant that killed millions. With Jade and Terrid's help, Jodram regained control long enough to use the Mortis Dagger on himself, taking his own life but destroying Abeloth forever. Terrid then escaped with the help of his apprentice, Hapan princess **Serissa Lohr**. On return to Hapes, Serissa killed her grandmother and replaced her as a Sith queen.

Davek continued to battle Veers' rebels and declared a new order of Imperial Knights separate from the Jedi. Marasiah, Vitor, and Roan would lead them, while Jaina, Arlen, and Marin left the Empire for Ossus. Jade Skywalker joined them to raise her sons without their father, all the while wondering when she and Darth Terrid would meet again.







# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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Kaynar Auchs, Mandalorian warrior (human male)  
Elliah Chalk, Hapan loyalist (human female)  
Allana Solo Djo, Jedi Master (human female)  
Arlen Fel, Jedi Master (human male)  
Davek Fel, Emperor (human male)  
Jaina Solo Fel, Jedi Master (human female)  
Marasiah Valtor Fel, Empress and First Knight (human female)  
Marin Fel, Jedi Knight (human female)  
Roan Fel, Prince and Imperial Knight (human male)  
Vitor Fel, Prince and Imperial Knight (human male)  
Darth Kheykid, Sith Lord (Barabel male)  
Darth Kroan, Sith Lord (human male)  
Serissa Lohr, Hapan queen and Sith Lord (human female)  
Nei Rin, apprentice shaper (Yuuzhan Vong female)  
Treis Sinde, Imperial Knight (human male)  
Tamar Skirata, Mandalorian warrior (human female)  
Jade Skywalker, Jedi Master (human female)  
Kol Skywalker, Jedi apprentice (human male)  
Nat Skywalker, Jedi apprentice (human male)  
Darth Terrid, Sith Lord (Chiss male)  
Mohrgan Valtor, Imperial Knight (human male)  
Corrien Veers, Restorationist leader (human male)  
Korosh Vull, Restorationist general (human male)  
Darth Wyyrlok, Sith Lord (Chagrian female)  
Tanith Zel, Hapan exile (human female)



A long time ago in a galaxy far,  
far away....



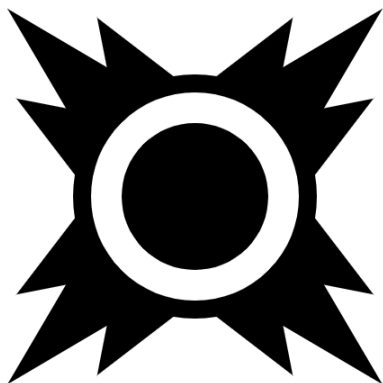
# **STAR WARS**

**LEGACY'S EDGE**  
**THE WAITING DARK**





# PART I



YOUTH IN WARTIME



## CHAPTER ONE

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Ansion's nightside face was only a slim crescent visible at the edge of starless black, colored warm browns and greens by the planet's vast steppe. As the approaching freighter drew close to the planet, it filled the cockpit viewport and Roan Fel could pick out constellations of dense artificial light marking cities. They were tiny compared to the major metropolises on Bastion but Ansion was a much less-populated, less-important world than the Imperial capital. Nonetheless, it still had a population of some hundred million sentients, mostly nonhuman, which made it all the more remarkable that the Restoration Front would find shelter here.

The freighter's pilot and co-pilot, both gaunt-faced and yellow-skinned Ansion natives, worked the controls as the ship shuddered into the atmosphere. The co-pilot tapped his earpiece and reported, "We're being hailed, on schedule. They're requesting we follow their flight plan and land at Cuipernam South Spaceport."

"Can that get us to Delgerhan?" asked Roan.

"Calculating trajectory now," the pilot tapped his navcomputer controls. "Done. Stand by to launch in four minutes. You'd better get to your pod, Your Majesty."

"Understood. Thank you," Roan said, then ducked out of the cockpit and hurried to the back of the ship.

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He reminded himself that the two Ansioni who crewed this ship had volunteered to do so. There weren't many of their race in Imperial intelligence but that pair had stepped up for a risky mission to deploy four Imperial Knights into potentially hostile territory. He also reminded himself that, if all went to plan, the hardest part of their job would be over in four minutes. For Roan and the others, it was just beginning.

He knew there were many on Bastion who questioned the wisdom of sending the Emperor's teenage son into a combat situation, but Davek Fel led by example and had personally commanded his fleets against the Restoration Front led by Corrien Veers and Leonal Grave. He'd led them again and again over the past eight years as the Empire's forces had taken planet after planet and finally driven Veers and Grave into hiding.

Following his father's example was Roan's duty as a newly-appointed Imperial Knight, and as Prince of the Empire.

When he reached the cargo hold he checked his equipment: his backpack, then lightsaber, and his clothes: not the ceremonial red armor and cape Imperial Knights were known for but green plasteel plates over an insulated camouflage jumpsuit. Then he bent low and pried open the access panel in the floor.

Just as he followed his father's example, Roan followed his older brother's lead. He dropped into the pod next to Vitor, lay down on his stomach, and pulled straps across his shoulders and back to secure himself. He found himself staring at two sets of boots belonging to the other two Imperial Knights assigned on their mission: his younger cousin Mohrgan Valtor, still an apprentice, and a slightly older Knight named Treis Sinda.

"Do they think we can hit the target?" asked Vitor.

Roan nodded. "They made the calculations. Trajectory set. We're good to go."

"Assuming this bucket doesn't fall apart on us," muttered Mohrgan.

"Have faith, apprentice," Vitor muttered, though Roan could feel the edge in his brother. That was natural but not encouraging; when this had started, when their father had declared himself

second Emperor of the Fel Dynasty, Roan had been just nine years old but Vitor, at fourteen, had been thrust immediately into the fighting and had never since stopped. Vitor's skill in the Force—especially in combat—had grown immensely in that time, so much that Roan doubted whether he could ever live up to his brother's example, but even a hero of the Empire could be afflicted with anxiety.

The pod's internal speaker rang once and the pilot's voice announced, "Stand by to eject. Thirty seconds."

"Copy, pilot," Vitor called back. "May the Force be with you."

"And you, Prince Fel."

The comm went silent and Roan took a deep breath. He counted in his head; twenty, fifteen, ten. He glanced sidelong at Vitor and saw his brother's lips twitching in a wordless whisper as he brought it down: five, four, three, two, one.

Just on time, the pod jerked violently and began its fall. Disguised as an external cargo crate mounted on the freighter's hull, their capsule had no directional repulsor jets like a traditional escape pod. Any emissions of energy might give them away to watching sensors. Instead, after five seconds of free-fall, the pod seemed to jump backward, almost throwing them into the roof, as its double-layered parachute extended to slow their descent through the night.

The parachute helped, but they were still dropping fast toward the surface. The Knights closed their eyes as one and reached out with the Force. This wasn't their first mission working as a four-man team and Roan was familiar with their minds: Vitor's battered resolve, Treis' stoic determination, Mohrgan's eagerness tinted with anxiety. They tasted each other's thoughts and turned their will to the common purpose of slowing the pod's fall.

It was that singular goal that drew Roan away from everything else: the smell of the pod's recycled hair, the tension of the restraint bands over his shoulders his cousin's boots just inches from his face, even the individual thoughts of the other Knights, his friends and family. The goal drew him out of time as well and after

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undetermined minutes or seconds the capsule shuddered one last time as they set down.

From there they quickly released their crash webbing. Vitor rolled onto his back and unlocked the hatch over their heads. With a push from the Force he knocked it open and shoved away the parachute that draped over them like a great blanket. Then, one by one, they crawled out into the night.

Roan had never been to Ansion before, but he knew they were supposed to deploy on the southwest corner of continent called Delgerhan, where intelligence reports suggested the Restoration Front had constructed a base. While Ansion's government pledged loyalty to Emperor Fel, its society was a confusing mess of various tribal allegiances and at least one of those factions seemed to be giving Veers' people shelter.

Delgerhan was the only continent on the largely flat planet to include major mountain ranges, and the plan had been for the Jedi to drop into this range and begin scouting for the Restoration Front base. Roan spun on one heel in a full circle and quickly decided they were not, in fact, in any mountain range. Rather they'd landed on one of the planet's vast rolling steppes.

"We missed the target," Roan sighed.

"Quite a night view, though," Treis muttered and tipped his head back. Roan did the same. The sky over the flat plane was a great black dome dotted with innumerable stars. You never saw the sky like this on Bastion, only from the inside of a spaceship. It felt weird to see so many stars and feel the wind on your face at the same time.

"We're not far off," Vitor announced. Roan spotted his brother in the starlight, already about ten meters from the landing pod and scanning the area with a set of night-vision macrobinoculars. "Check your north-northwest."

Roan slung his pack off his back and fetched his own binoculars. Using the device's internal compass as a guide he scanned the low-rolling hills until he spotted the rise of mountain in the distance.

"At least fifteen kilometers to the foothills," said Vitor. "After that the tough part starts."

"Any idea what time it is, local?" asked Morghan.

"No hint of dawn," Treis said. "I'm guessing we have at least four, five hours before sunup."

"Best get walking, then," said Vitor. "Everyone have their packs?" When the younger knights gave affirmatives he said, "Okay, let's get marching."

As they began stumbling through the grassy plain, faint and slightly silver in the moonless starlight, Mohrgan muttered, "So this is the glamorous life of an Imperial Knight."

"We live to serve, apprentice," Vitor said, playful but firm.

As they marched through the night Roan set his eyes on the darkness ahead. As he stared, he began to make out dark ridges eclipsing stars near the horizon. They seemed so distant, but he knew that soon enough they'd reach them, and find the danger they'd come for.

By the time they reached the foothills the sun had come up and by the time they climbed halfway up the first set of mountains it was going down again. Though it made passage more difficult, Vitor was glad when night fell. The Ansion skies were cloudless and he'd been worried all day that they might be spotted by a patrolling airspeeder or even an orbital satellite.

There was still the threat of that at night, so they waited until they'd found a shallow cave to remove the portable heater from Treis' pack and turn it on. In this dry, windy climate the days were hot and nights cool. Temperature changed fast. Mohrgan was clearly relieved to be off his feet and resting in front of the heater but Treis remained tense; he'd been through enough infiltration missions to be healthily paranoid.

Roan still had energy, so he volunteered to scout the surrounding hills. Vitor stopped him from going alone. This took the younger brother by surprise; then his eyes narrowed in suspicion and he added they should stay together for mutual safety.

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Vitor didn't have it in him to argue with his brother. Roan might even be right.

Their night-vision goggles amplified starlight and visualized the rocky crags and nearby ridges in shades of black and green. They split off at first, using the Force to keep track of each other as they ranged off in different directions.

Roan didn't come out and say it, but his suspicion was clear. He thought his brother was chasing a dream again and he wasn't wrong. Vitor had gotten this one on the flight to Ansion. Like all of his premonitions he remembered only basic and blurry details on waking. There was nothing in those dreams to suggest that they were, in themselves, Force visions, but it had been a long, long time since he'd remembered anything from a dream that *hadn't* pointed to the near future.

Of his vision on Ansion he remembered night and cold wind. He remembered the rough rocks of a mountain range while the electric light and warmth of human activity peeking out beneath an acres-wide camouflage net that would have blocked the reach of outside sensors. He remembered seeing tiny figures moving about in that light, many wearing the rough-surfaced, bronze-tinted cortosis stormtrooper armor of the Restoration Front's elite units.

Vague and confusing as those barely-remembered dreams were, they always pointed him true. They said the future was always in motion, but the dozen or so dreams he'd had since this war began had always pointed to what was coming soon.

He didn't like those dreams, especially since they came months apart and never when he was expecting them, but more than once they'd saved his life, his brother's life, and the lives of loyal Imperial soldiers in this grueling slog against Veers' rebels. If they were to be his gift then they'd be his gift; it wasn't like he could ask the Force to stop them.

He and Roan crossed over different ridges and peered into different valleys. Vitor kept his Force-connection with his brother in the back of his awareness but put most of his concentration on the path ahead. This slope was treacherous and he progressed



slowly, stopping regularly to break out his macrobinoculars and scan for signs of life.

The binoculars didn't do much good, but with his naked eyes he spotted one diamond-shaped hilltop jutting up under the starlight. Though he hadn't remembered it from his dream until now, it stirred some latent echo. He started toward it, dipping first into a shallowed valley, then more slowly climbing up. As he moved, he reached out to Roan and told his brother to come in his direction.

He kept moving forward, out of the valley and onto the next ridge, then found a high outcropping nearer to the diamond-shaped peak. He lay down on his stomach and prepared to scan the next area with his binoculars but stopped. He spotted tiny slivers of light peeking through trees downslope. It was a constant glow, electric and artificial, rather than a flickering fire. He looked up at that half-familiar peak and was sure he'd found the right place.

Rather than approach the enemy camp he waited for Roan to catch up with him. All he had to do was point at the dim light for his brother to understand. Without sharing any words they worked their way separately downslope, through the trees, toward whatever was waiting.

Vitor was operating on his Force-visions again. Roan was sure of it. He'd been with his brother once before when this happened, years ago during a mission on Jaemus. Vitor had anticipated an ambush and maneuvered their party of Knights around to take the enemy from behind. The Restorationists had found the perfect hiding place and there'd been no way for Knights to have spotted them, so even before Vitor admitted it after the fight, Roan had suspected the Force guided his hand.

Vitor rarely seemed pleased with those visions, though they'd saved his life again and again. The fact that they came arbitrarily seemed to frustrate him, but Roan couldn't help but feel a familiar spike of envy for his brother. Both of them were strong in the Force but Vitor seemed especially blessed. One day, hopefully far in the future, he'd naturally succeed their father Davek as the third

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Emperor Fel. Where that left Roan, the young man didn't know. His fate was less written than Vitor's, in more ways than one.

He followed Vitor's lead down the slope, winding around the tree-trunks as they grew closer to the light. They found a small rise in the land and lay down on their stomachs, shoulder-to-shoulder between two trees. From this spot they could see that the bottom of this valley had a large sensor-scrambling camouflage net drawn over it. Through the broad but narrow horizontal gap between rocky slope and the camo net's roof they could make out the activity inside. Several large hovertanks and squatting inactive walkers sat surrounded by cargo crates stacked high. At this hour of the night only a few men and women moved about. The Restorationist guerillas had stopped wearing olive-green Imperial uniforms years ago and these ones wore a variety of drag gray or brown civilian clothes with only the scarlet bands around their right biceps as symbols of their affiliation.

They watched the activity for a few minutes in silence before Roan saw what he'd been afraid to see. A half-dozen figures in stormtrooper armor marched into view, probably on a nighttime patrol. Even from a distance Roan could see that their armor had a rough surface instead of a smooth one and was tinted bronze instead of white. Back when this war began nearly a decade ago, Moff Veers had received a huge supply of rare cortosis ore, probably from his Sith ally on Kuat. That ore had been smelted into stormtrooper armor specifically for its ability to short out a lightsaber, and many Imperial Knights had fallen to cortosis-protected stormtroopers over the course of this long slog. As Veers' forces dwindled and the Restoration movement became a ragtag scattered force, the Imperial Knights had allowed themselves to hope that they'd run down the last of the cortosis troopers.

Roan nudged his brother. "Do you want to head back to camp and report this?"

"In a minute." Vitor lowered his binoculars. "I want to get a little closer."

"That's dangerous. They've got to have sensor traps around the perimeter."

"I know. I spotted a couple. I'll stay clear."

"What's the point of getting closer?"

"See that there?" Vitor pointed to a square metal cabin that Roan had taken for an equipment shed. "I'm pretty sure that's the house for a lift that goes underground."

"How do you know that?"

"See that power generator on the side? I'm pretty sure it's for a turbolift."

"If they've got an underground base there's no way we're sneaking in. Get back to camp, make the call, and let the military do the rest." Roan hesitated, then asked, "Is this about something you saw in a dream?"

Vitor shook his head. "I only saw what we're seeing here. The rest...." He shrugged. "I just want a better look. Stay here. Watch my back."

"Not a problem," Roan muttered, grateful to be staying under cover and embarrassed that his brother was once again the one taking the bold risks.

Vitor crawled over the ridge and scampered further downslope. Roan took out his binoculars to track him and track the motion of the Imperials moving in the encampment, apparently unaware. He kept his Force-awareness locked on his brother. He could feel Vitor's cool intent and the current of anxiety that ran beneath, healthily restrained. He watched as Vitor dropped to his stomach again and started scanning the camp with his binoculars. He felt his brother's curiosity rise but couldn't tell exactly what was drawing his attention. The cortosis troopers were nowhere to be seen; only a few men and women with red armbands moved about.

Then Roan sensed what he should have sensed earlier. A few minds behind him, unfamiliar but dark with intent. He swore aloud and sent a cry of alarm to his brother through the Force, then pushed himself off his stomach and stood upright with one hand on his lightsaber. He scanned the dark forest but saw nothing clearly. He only knew they were close.

He looked back over his shoulder. Vitor was already hurrying up the slope toward him, a crouched silhouette against the light

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from the camp. Roan hesitated, uncertain whether to run or wait for his brother to catch up.

That was when the first laser-blasts streaked out of the dark. Roan's danger-sense gave him a second's warning, enough to switch on his lightsaber and catch the first shot on his pure-white blade. Then more blasts fell, so fast and so many that he couldn't bat them all back. They came from different angles and though he couldn't see the enemy he knew they'd formed a semicircle before moving in to take him.

He felt Vitor's alarm in the Force; his brother wasn't under attack yet and was racing to help. The next thing Roan felt was the sting of a laser blast that sizzled across the edge of his left shoulder. His entire arm tingled and went numb; they were using stun shots.

There was no point in falling back to Vitor; the enemy camp was at their backs. He charged forward, hoping to at least mess up their entrapment formation. More laser shots came and he ducked low to avoid the first few, but another stun shot snapped at his boot. He stumbled and reared upright. The enemy was close now; the white glow of his saber revealed one cortosis-armored stormtrooper on his right, another on his left. Through his panic he couldn't even sense Vitor anymore, so Roan did the only thing he could. He threw himself at the trooper on his left and got close enough to cut through the barrel of his blaster, then pulled his saber back and angled its tip for a quick forward thrust. His blade slipped in between two cortosis plates and scorched through fabric and flesh right beneath the trooper's ribcage. The trooper twisted in pain and before Roan could withdraw and the lightsaber scraped against the edges of two cortosis plates. The saber's handle seemed to rattle in his fist and then the blade shrunk out as though he'd released the switch.

As the other trooper's stun-blast took him between the shoulders Roan had a half-second to berate himself for being stupid. He didn't even feel it when he hit the ground.

Vitor felt his brother's blaze of desperate panic wink out; not in the agony of death but the sudden cessation of a stun blast. He felt the

stormtroopers who'd gotten him too; felt their determination leavened by relief.

If they didn't know he was there, Vitor had two options. He could try and rush in to save Roan and take them while their guard was down, though there was no telling how many there were. He had to assume the soldiers were armored with cortosis and virtually invulnerable to his lightsaber.

His other option was to fall back to their camp in the cave, where Treis and Mohrgan guarded the communications equipment they'd use to send short text-based messages to the listening post. They'd been promised that within thirty minutes of a hail they'd have enough backup to take out whatever hidden outpost the Restoration Front had built on Ansion. It would take him at least twenty minutes at a reckless pace to get back to the cave and there was no guarantee all their backup would be worth a damn to rescue Roan.

He felt torn but only for a moment; then duty set in. His father had drilled into him over and over that Imperial Knights existed to serve the Empire. They did not go in for flashy heroics or pointless sacrifices. They were soldiers of the Empire who used the Force as their greatest weapon; that was all.

As a soldier, Vitor knew his duty. If he got himself killed or captured trying to free his brother there'd be no help at all.

He reached out with the Force one last time, felt the location of the soldiers gathered around Roan's unconscious body, then rose to his feet. He moved as quickly and quietly as he could through the dark forest, away from the troopers, away from his brother, and prayed this was the choice that would save him.

## CHAPTER TWO

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**T**he holographic map that glowed in the center of the room displayed the Empire as a thousand pinpoints of white light, each one marking an inhabited star system. This was the space Davek Fel had lived in all his life, but it was only in the past eight years that he'd learned the names of every one of those thousand systems. When he'd first assumed control of Imperial space nearly one-third of those white lights had been colored red, marking them as swearing loyalty to Corrien's Veers' Restoration movement. He'd looked at that map every single day since then, giving each point of red special consideration as he chipped away at Veers' power base.

At first it had been a grueling series of military campaigns. Veers and his allies had made a fortress out of the Velcar Sector and especially the Entralla system, where Moff Thane had pledged loyalty in the fight against what Veers consistently labeled the 'puppet-emperor.' Davek had started the war with a clear advantage in territory and manpower. His forces held control over the capital at Bastion and the two largest naval shipyards at Bilbringi and Yaga Minor. Despite that, it had taken two years to establish control over most of the Velcar Sector. Veers' fighters had proven unexpectedly

ferocious, and worse, they were led by Admiral Leonal Grave, an officer about Davek's age who'd proven exceptionally formidable.

After four years of bloody struggle had come the turning point. Davek's forces had laid siege to Entralla and after a month of heavy losses on both sides Moff Thane had finally surrendered. Veers and Grave had fled the system aboard the last major warship in their possession: the battered but still very deadly super star destroyer *Nemesis*.

Four years ago the last red lights on Davek's holo-map had turned white. From the map alone his supremacy looked assured, but *Nemesis* was still out there. So were Veers and Grave. The admiral may have been a hardliner swayed by nostalgia for Palpatine's oppressive empire, but he'd quickly learned how to fight like a rebel. For four more years Davek had been forced to fight defensively against an enemy that appeared out of nowhere, hit fast and hard, then fled to hidden bases scattered among the thousand inhabited systems in the Empire and the thousands more with no populated worlds.

When this all began he'd looked at the red on his map with determination. Now that the stars had been all-white for four years he felt no triumph when looking at it, only weariness. There was still no hesitation; he'd accepted the lifelong burden guarding his father's legacy when he'd declared himself emperor.

As he stood at the edge of the holographic star-field, near the marker for Bastion at the Rimward edge of the map, Davek tapped the controller in his hand. A handful of stars began blinking red, on-and-off. He shifted his attention to the figure standing on the other side of the chamber, near the Coreward end and Bilbringi. The black-uniformed, blue-skinned Chiss commander marked the blinking systems with narrowed red eyes.

"We're sending scouts to some of these systems now," Davek explained. "Ansion. Brodo Asogi. Lyneaxtra. Guiteica. Roxuli. Imperial Knights or military scouts depending on the alleged situation. If the Restorationists have bases there, we'll find them."

"Are you searching the primary inhabited planets or the whole systems?" asked Meshk'anar'ntiola.

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"Again, that varies by system, depending on our intelligence sources. We know they have other bases in uninhabited systems. Mining operations on asteroid fields and the like. *Nemesis* is certainly in one of those systems. But they're also laying low on habited systems. Gathering foodstuffs and other supplies that can only be gotten on habitable worlds."

"Have you considered Veers may have moved outside your borders entirely?"

"Have you seen any indication that they have?" Davek asked his cousin.

At the start of this war Kanarn's people had been most enthusiastic helpers. The Chiss Ascendancy held Veers accountable for many of their dead and had wanted him brought to justice, but as the war dragged on the Chiss' typically isolationist attitudes had taken sway again. After Entralla they'd withdrawn most of their forces. Davek's aunt Wynssa, last surviving child of his grandfather Soontir Fel, had taken the lead of the Ascendancy's interventionist wing, but the old woman's health was failing and she could no longer play a major role in the Ascendancy's policy-making. Her adopted son Kanarn and a task force of a dozen Chiss destroyers was all the Ascendancy had left to aid Davek's war effort.

Despite his limited military capability, Kanarn was still good at relaying information from Chiss intelligence. More than once he'd pointed Davek to signs of covert Restorationist activity. In this case, however, he just shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't have anything specific. It's not unfeasible that Veers might bribe an Alliance member world near the border to give him shelter."

"If that were the case I'd trust Alliance intelligence to inform me," Davek said honestly. The democratic government on Coruscant had been, unsurprisingly, slow to accept Davek as rightful monarch of a remade Empire, but eventually they'd come around. Once their economy started taking a hit from interruption of trade they'd starting quietly backing Davek with supplies and intelligence. "Besides," he waved at the map, "We've been aggressively going after Veers' cash flow. He doesn't have Kuati Sith Lords building super star destroyers for him anymore. He's a pariah



running out of money and equipment. That's why he has to scrounge for allies on worlds like these."

"I do hope you're right," Kanarn said. "Still, he and Grave are both.... Canny opponents."

"Trust me, I'm aware."

The comlink in Davek's pocket buzzed. He retrieved it and switched it on. "This is the Emperor."

The familiar voice of his Kel Dor aide said, "My lord, the listening station outside Ansion has just been alerted."

Davek tensed. "The scouting team?"

"They're calling in full backup."

"Is the team still planetbound?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Thank you. Please keep me informed of any developments."

Stiffly, Davek turned off the comm and pocketed it. The map updated in real-time; the light marking Ansion began blinking gold to denote a contested zone.

"It appears one of your recon missions was successful," observed Kanarn.

"Oh, yes." He couldn't make himself sound pleased.

"Was this team a military one or was it your Knights?"

"Knights. Four of them."

"Ah." Kanarn didn't have to ask the question.

"Roan and Vitor both," Davek explained.

Kanarn's red eyes went wide. "You let them go together?"

"Vitor and Roan are Imperial knights. Their duty is to be on the front lines, protecting Imperial citizens. As the Empire's princes it's *especially* important that they not be sheltered from their responsibility." He said it firmly, half reminding himself. He'd never feel comfortable with sending his young sons into potentially dangerous situations but it had to be done.

He expected Kanarn to point out that even Roan, at seventeen, would be considered an adult in Chiss society but he refrained. Instead he asked, "What sort of backup have you prepared?"

"One star destroyer and a retrieval team led by the First Knight."

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Kanarn's eyes widened even more, but all he said was, "Ah."

Sending his sons to Ansion was a necessary risk, but Davek had never intended to put his sons in more danger than he had to. It would be infuriating to stew on Bastion and wait for battle updates but that was part of his own duty as Emperor. He could at least console himself with the knowledge that the most capable help his sons could want was on the way.

Tycoons in the defense industry often justified their work by claiming that nothing produced technological advances like a war. The battle between Davek Fel and Corrien Veers for the soul of the Empire had yielded some evidence to prove them right and none had become as quickly iconic as the new *Pellaeon*-class star destroyer. After losing its Sith Lord chairman, Kuat Drive Yards became more than happy to sell to the Empire's legitimate government. Design innovations from Veer's *Nemesis* had been put to use on a mass-produced scale in the Fel Empire's fleet and were easily visible in the smooth symmetrical slope of its hull radiating outward from a low-set bridge. While the same two-kilometer length as the older *Predator*-class destroyer, it boasted almost fifty percent more firepower and thirty percent stronger shields.

One brand-new *Pellaeon*-class destroyer would be more than enough to subdue the entirety of Ansion. It would certainly be sufficient to demolish the hidden Restorationist base. For First Knight and Empress Marasiah Valtor Fel, none of that mattered more than saving the young men on the surface. Both her sons were down there, as was her nephew Mohrgan. She hadn't felt any of their deaths in the Force, which was cause for hope, but she knew from Vitor's short message they were in trouble.

After all these years she still felt like she belonged in the cockpit of a TIE fighter. In the long grind against Veers' rebels she'd flown her TIE Saber into too many firefights to count; now she plunged unimpeded toward Ansion at the point of an attacking wedge consisting of a half-dozen Knights in starfighters followed by the star destroyer's full ground assault complement.

Ansion's nightside filled Marasiah's viewport with empty black. She checked her scanners; Vitor's location beacon was still broadcasting but there was no indication of activity nearby. The Restorationists were well-hidden and didn't seem to have noticed their approach.

When that changed, when they realized they were doomed, Roan's life was very possibly forfeit. Her duty to the Empire was to eliminate this rat's nest; her duty to her son was to save him. She still hoped she could accomplish both at once.

As her cockpit rattled with the friction of atmospheric entry, Marasiah tapped her comm console and hailed Vitor. At this relatively close range his portable audio transmitter should have worked. She waited for a few tense seconds before her son's voice, scratchy but so good to hear, said, "This is Ground Team responding."

"Ground Team, this is Knight One. We're tracking your beacon and inbound, about two hundred seconds away. Can you give us direction to the prime target?"

His mother's voice seemed to take him aback, but after a moment Vitor said, "Prime target is two point three kilometers north-north west, in a ridge valley with a camo-net thrown over. Knight One, we still have a team member inside the facility."

"Understood, Ground Team. Take your people and meet us at the target. May the Force be with you."

"You too, Mom," Vitor said, and killed the switch.

Marasiah adjusted her homing sensors to the new location and patched an update to the nav computer for the other ships in the attack group. Then she switched her helmet commlink to a team-wide broadcast and said, "All units, target is marked and two minutes away. All troops prepare for deployment. Fighters, maintain air superiority. Primary aim is interdiction. Capture when possible but don't be afraid to defend yourselves." She took a breath and added, "Be advised, hostiles have Prince Roan in custody. Safe retrieval is a top priority. Over."

She killed the switch and felt the shock rippled through everyone in the attack group, from the other Knights all the way

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down to the troopers and pilots. After shock came determination. Just as Davek had been on the front lines in the war against the Restorationists, so were his sons. In leading by example and taking such risks their family had won over many Imperial citizens skeptical of a self-proclaimed Emperor.

Marasiah began decelerating as the night-dark surface grew close. It was almost impossible to make out anything clearly and if hadn't been for Roan they'd have saved this attack for daytime hours when they could actually see what they were doing. Whatever sensor-jamming field the Restorationists had put up it was effective; even at close range Marasiah still couldn't pick up any heat or metal readings.

Her only option was to follow Vitor's directions. Once they identified the valley the TIEs began flying tight circles and the troop transports dropped into low hovers over the surrounding terrain. Pools of light spread beneath the drop ships, illuminating forested slopes and white-armored stormtroopers riding lowered cabled to the surface, dozens at a time.

As soon as the stormies started deploying the forest lit up with laserfire. Red rifle-blasts flashed in the night and a few explosions-grenades or land mines, she couldn't tell- burst around the edges of the valley.

Marasiah reached out to her sons, Vitor first. She felt him approaching and told him to hurry. Then she reached out to Roan. He was conscious; she could feel his panic and fear and recrimination and tried to soothe them, knowing full well that the Restorationists might try and kill him any minute. They might also use him to barter. There was simply no predicting.

All she knew was that she couldn't fly circles overhead while her son's life was at stake. Marasiah dropped her TIE lower over the center of the valley and turned on her forward headlights. It was immediately clear she was hovering above a stretched-out tarpaulin, colored with camouflage tones but flat in texture. To cover such a wide area the camo net must have been held up by a metal frame, but that frame would never be strong enough to support a TIE Saber.

She decided it didn't have to. She cut her repulsors to minimum power, extended the TIE Saber's landing struts, and let her fighter drop onto the camo net. Her ship rocked as it pressed down on the metal girders and snapped them. The net, thick and woven with sensor-jamming metals, collapsed beneath her without tearing. When her fighter set down with a final shudder she immediately popped open the dorsal hatch, pulled off helmet, and undid her crash webbing.

She pulled herself out of the fighter, jumped from the open hatch, and landed both boots on the crumpled net beneath. She pulled out her weapon and thumbed it to life: she'd constructed it with crystals from a moon of Sartinaynian's largest gas giant to create a pure-white blade and other Imperial Knights had taken to crafting their own lightsabers in imitation.

The blade cut easily through the camo net and she slipped through the tear. The uncollapsed sections of the roof still held and Marasiah found herself in the dead-center of the enemy base. The stormtrooper units were still advancing from the valley slopes and Restorationist troops had mostly moved to the edges to defend. Her less-than-subtle entrance had still drawn attention: men and women in brown civvie clothes and red armbands were rushing toward her, but when they spotted her white blade and red armor—the trademarks of the Imperial Knights— they skidded to a halt.

Fear was good, but it wouldn't last long enough for the friendly stormies to reach her. At least, Marasiah thought, there weren't any cortosis-armored troopers around.

Marasiah summoned a wave of Force energy that pushed the people around her back a few steps, when charged for then nearest cluster of stunned men. A few began firing but their shots were easily telegraphed and she could bat them back with her saber. Two swift strikes cut the barrels off three rifles; two snapped elbows and a kick dropped the fighters. Marasiah was a small woman but she drew on the Force to add extra strength to her blows. She spun on one heel to make a full-circle survey of the area; the other Restorationists had been frightened by her show and hesitated to move on her or even shoot.

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She caught one man's eyes widening and immediately spun around. Three troopers with bronze-tinted armor were running toward her and firing away. She snarled back a swear and deflected their shots, then jumped back toward the collapsed section of the ceiling to use it as cover. She kept her back to her landed starfighter and kept on deflecting shots, but she knew that when the cortosis-armored troopers got close enough they'd break out bladed weapons and lunge for her. Her own red plasteel armor was as strong as standard stormtrooper fare, good enough to stop a vibroblade or long-range laser-shot but nowhere near as good as cortosis.

It was all she could do to throw up a hand and push them away with the Force. The cortosis troopers staggered but immediately charged ahead again, still shooting.

Then she heard a voice shout, loud and clear, "Fire in the hole!" and saw a small black sphere arc out of nowhere toward her, toward the approaching troopers. She crossed her arms over her face and raised a Force-wall just before the flechette grenade exploded. The trooper's cortosis was enough to deflect all the grenade's tiny metal shard but some still slipped between the armor plates, shredding fabric and skin, tendons and muscle. The attacking stormtroopers collapsed like dolls with strings cut; if not for the warning Marasiah would have been shredded even worse.

Sounds of battle rose from all corners of the base but a trooper in friendly white armor rushed to her side and said, "Your Majesty, are you alright?"

Marasiah had grown up on one of the Empire's neglected backwaters and it had taken her a long time to get used to being treated as royalty. Right now she was glad for the honest devotion in the trooper's voice.

"Thank you for the help, soldier," she said. "Now gather your men. We need to find my son."

Roan Fel had never been captured by the enemy until now. He had, however, thought about what he'd do if this situation arose. His father had insisted on it; as the emperor's younger son he was as

tempting a target as could be, and for the Restorationists he'd be a prize alive or dead.

He'd run through different scenarios in his head and some of them had involved waking up from a stun blast, gagged and bound to a chair in an empty room, but none had involved sitting alone and ignored while some battle was clearly raging above him. He could feel his mother and brother up there and he could feel Treis and Mohrgan too, and beyond those familiar presences he knew many more people were fighting and dying. They'd probably taken him down into the subterranean portion of the base, which was why the only physical hint he got of the battle was the occasional muffled rumble from the ceiling.

Just the knowledge that the people he loved were nearby and coming for him was enough to give him hope. He wasn't just terrified of dying, though that was bad enough. The thought of dying pathetically here and now was *infuriating*. He might not have been like Vitor, preternaturally talented and heir to an empire, but he knew he stood at the front of a long line of illustrious men and women- Fels, Solos, and Skywalkers- who'd shaped the galaxy again and again for the past hundred years. He craved to make some contribution to that legacy, somehow, and to die here would leave him pathetic and unaccomplished, a disgrace to the ones who'd gone before.

When the door to his cell opened he knew his loved ones were still too far away, and his heart fell. A single human male, middle-aged and thickset, walked into the room. He was breathing fast and sweat gleamed on his face. The door closed right behind him and he stood there, a good two meters away from Roan, with a hand on the butt of his holstered pistol. He stared at the young prince hard and Roan could feel his indecision.

"You don't want to kill me," Roan said. Force suggestion had never been his strong suit, but he tried it now. "You want to untie me. Take me alive. Use me as a hostage."

The man took two steps closer but didn't draw his gun. "Don't try your mind trick with me, Jedi filth."

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"I'm not a Jedi. I'm an Imperial knight." He tried to sound brave.

The man took out his pistol and held it at his side. "You're that damned pretend-emperor's son."

"Exactly. That's why you need to use me to negotiate. There's no hope for you if you kill me."

"We're dead already," the man snarled and raised the pistol in both hands. The weapon trembled but he tried to keep the barrel aimed straight at Roan's head.

"This won't get you anything!" Roan bleated. He was too terrified to try Force-influence now. He'd been in combat situations before Anson, even faced death a few times, but he'd never been this helpless or scared.

"I'll kill the pretender's son. That's something." He spoke like he was trying to convince himself.

"No! My family, my parents, they'll do anything you want to get me alive! They'll give you anything!"

"No, no that won't work," the man shook his head and rasped, "Too late for you, kid."

Roan found just enough concentration to grab the gun with his mind and wrench it to the side. It went off in the man's hand and a plasma-bolt warmed Roan's cheek as it whipped past and scorched the wall behind him. Relief lasted a second; then the man lurched forward and whipped the butt of his pistol against Roan's temple. His vision exploded with white right before the man kicked him in the stomach. Pain shot through his body as a rib cracked. One more kicked tipped his chair over and sent him tumbling to the floor. He didn't have the presence of mind to lift his head and his cheekbone stung against the rough duracrete.

His whole body shuddered with pain. His vision swam and he could barely focus on the man looming above him, blaster steadied and aimed. Roan couldn't call on the Force again; he was too wounded, too weak, too *young* to save himself. Indignant rage filled him but all he could do was squeeze his eyes shut and wait for the end.



The sound of the laserblast came but death didn't. A moment of confusion stretched out endlessly; then he felt a heavy body land hard on his. The back of the chair held up some of the weight as he twisted beneath it and opened his eyes. His vision was still blurred but he saw four stormtroopers in white armor filling the room. A smaller figure filled the doorway, a figure in red armor and long dark hair falling from a pale face. His mother crouched down beside him and touched his face with a cool hand.

"Roan, are you alright?" she asked. "Roan?"

His eyes fluttered and he tried to nod, even as one broken cheek pressed hard into the floor. He was still too hurt and dazed to speak but he felt his mother reaching for him in the Force, sending assurance and love. He grabbed onto that feeling and tried to send the same back.

Her expression relaxed with relief. Another figure appeared over her shoulder: his brother Vitor. Both looked strong and undamaged, even after all the fighting it must have taken to get here. They pulled the body of his attacker off him, cut him free of his bonds, then sat him upright in the chair. By that time he'd finally gathered the wits and strength to speak.

"The base... secure?"

"That's right," his mother nodded.

"Treis? Mohrgan?"

"They're doing fine," Vitor said, "But we need to get *you* to a medic."

"I'm fine," he said on instinct, though they all knew it wasn't true.

"You've probably got a concussion, some cracked bones, maybe broken ribs. Fine doesn't cover it."

Marasiah looked at the lead stormtrooper. "Sergeant, call a medical team down here for an extract."

"I'm alright," Roan said, and tried to rise from his chair. His body ached, the world swam, and he fell immediately back down.

His mother ran her hand across his face. "Just stay calm, Roan. It's all right. We're here for you."

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They were, and it was good. The mission had been a success apparently, and that was good too, but he couldn't feel as though he'd been anything but a burden. He'd survived, though; that was something. It kept alive the hope that one day he could be strong enough to protect himself, his family, and his empire. There wasn't anything he wanted more.

"Our spies in the pretender's navy have reported final confirmation. We have lost Ansion."

Leonal Grave let the words sink in among the men assembled. Rumors had started a few hours ago that they'd lost contact with the Restoration Front base hidden on the planet's northern continent. When the Supreme Commander summoned all his top officers in the conference room aboard *Nemesis*, there had been little room for doubt. Now there was none at all.

Despite this latest defeat Grave stood at the head of the table, stiff and proud. He tried to keep up appearances like he kept up the fight, stubbornly, but the war against Davek Fel had aged him. His hair had as much gray as black in it and his tanned face radiated crease-lines. He still wore the olive-green admiral's uniform he's started this war with, plus the red armband that had evolved into a loyalty badge for the remaining Restorationists. Grave tried so hard to act the resolute Imperial commander that it was somehow painful to see.

Korosh Vull covered his scowl with a hand and looked away. Outside the viewport were the drifting asteroids that belted the middle of the Kovix-589 system. The Kovix star cluster was located at the edge of Imperial space and the edge of the galaxy, and of its seven-hundred-odd stars not one of them hosted a life-supporting planet. This particular white dwarf at least had a belt of mineral-rich asteroids that also happened to jam most starships' sensor scans. It was the perfect place to hide, but they'd been hiding for so long this asteroid belt had come to feel like a graveyard and their great warship, once the symbol of a strong Empire restored, felt like a coffin.

It had been almost three years since *Nemesis* had limped away from its last engagement with Davek Fel's fleets. The super star destroyer hadn't left the Kovix-589 system since then. Restorationist forces had scattered, seeding themselves on two dozen inhabited worlds through Imperial space, and bit by bit Davek Fel had ferreted the Restorationist bases out and eliminated them. To continue the metaphor, the loss of Ansion was just one more nail in the coffin.

When the grim silence in the room became too much, *Nemesis'* captain, a white-haired but vigorous man named Hough Fenrec, asked, "Is there any chance this will lead them to our other bases?"

"Not even Ansion's commander had access to that information," Vull reminded him. In the years since they'd lost their last stronghold on Entralla, the Restoration movement had been forced to adopt tactics like fast hit-and-run attacks, loose supply chains, and a compartmentalized organization that prioritized secrecy and damage control. In other words, those who'd preserve Palpatine's legacy now fought like rebels. The bitter irony was lost on no one.

"Ansion was not our largest base," said Grave, "But it was our one closest to Bilbringi. We won't be able to monitor its activities as easily."

Vull found himself almost grateful. Every report on the Bilbringi shipyards hammered home how outnumbered and outgunned the Restoration Front was.

The idea of surrendering has crossed his mind more than once. He imagined it had to most of them, though no one ever spoke it aloud unless he wanted summary execution. Punishment was only one reason he'd never attempted to escape this coffin. He'd joined the Empire's service thirty years ago with the goal of protecting the Empire's citizens and guarding its proud history. Davek Fel's shoddy propaganda claimed that Admiral Grave and Corrien Veers had assassinated the Empire's ruling Head of State to seize power themselves, but Vull had been there when this really started. He'd been Commander of the Air Group for this ship, then called *Invincible*, and had seen Fel's fleet fire the first shots in a war that

tore the Empire apart. He knew where responsibility for all this lay and couldn't forgive.

It was bitter irony that Korosh Vull had been there for the start of Davek Fel's ascent. Twenty-five years ago he'd been a bomber pilot aboard a frigate called *Shieldbreaker*, and when that ship had been destroyed his pilots had found haven on its partner *Voidwalker*. *Voidwalker's* captain had been killed in action and its tactical lieutenant had taken over. For six arduous weeks, Davek Fel had led the men and women aboard *Voidwalker* through one near-death situation after another while trapped behind enemy lines. All these years later Fel was Emperor and *Voidwalker's* CAG- Vull's commander and eventual friend- was Empress.

He should have seen the warning signs. Growing up Vull's grandfather had told him repeatedly how his own father had been killed in the Jedi coup attempt against then-Chancellor Palpatine. He'd been raised to believe that the Jedi Order, by its very nature, was contemptuous of secular laws and bound to overthrow existing governments whenever their cult fell from favor. Eight years ago, right before his eyes, it had happened again and it had shocked him. He should never have forgotten his grandfather's lesson but his friendship with Marasiah Valtor had caused him to drop his guard.

For all these eight years he'd wondered what would have happened if he hadn't let his guard down, if he hadn't let his affection for one woman blind him to an existential threat.

"Do we know *how* they found our Ansion base?" asked Fenrec, jarring Vull from grim memories.

Eyes went to Vreen Sojuz, once-chief of Imperial Intelligence on Bastion and one of the few senior figures who'd refused to bow to self-styled new emperor. The gaunt man clasped bony fingers on the tabletop and said, "We're uncertain at the moment. From what our spies have gathered, the Jedi were at the fore of the attack."

Some men sighed, some shook their heads. Vull snorted and looked back out the window. Fel and Marasiah had rebranded the cult as 'Imperial Knights' but they weren't fooling anyone. The cultists were brave, he'd given them that much. With Marasiah as their leader they'd been at the fore of every battle; without their

tricks it was doubtful Fel would have seized power so quickly and so thoroughly.

The sound of a door opening drew Vull's attention from the rubble. Everybody looked to see one last man step into the chamber. Corrien Veers barely paid them attention. He made long loping strides to the head of the table, where he dropped himself into the open seat beside where Grave was standing.

Veers tipped back in his chair and looked up at the admiral. "Well. What's the bad news?"

"Ansion has fallen," Grave said simply.

Veers made a growling noise at the back of his throat and ran a hand through his hair. "Complete losses?"

"None of our ships escaped."

"Well. Another one to cross off the list." Veers scowled down at the table. Vull was too far away to smell his breath but he bet it carried the stench of liquor. Since they'd taken refuge in this graveyard Veers had rarely smelled of anything else.

"Perhaps," offered Fenrec, "It is time to make another broadcast."

"It may improve morale," offered Sojuz, though by now it was common knowledge that whenever Veers made a bold defiant speech it meant the Restorationists had taken another loss. The speeches themselves were good and fiery- it seemed to be the only skill Veers had left- but it was impossible for them to inspire as they once had.

Veers' face darkened a little more. "A broadcast is pointless. We need action. We need to make them *fear* again."

Grave asked "Do you have something specific in mind, sir?"

Veers didn't seem the notice the minute pause before *sir*. "I've been thinking about this for some time. We strike where they least expect and where it will hurt most. And we'll do it in a way that will cost us next to nothing. Admiral Sojuz?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I want you to reach out to your criminal allies and arrange for us to have access for a ship inbound to Bastion, civilian. Can that be done?"

"Of course, sir," he said with a succinct nod.

It seemed to grate everyone but Veers that they were desperate enough to buy their weapons and supplies from alien gangster trash. The man went on, "We'll load it with warheads and make sure it can evade their best security sensors, then turn it into a weapon. Ram it into an orbital docking station. Drop it onto Ravelin, it doesn't matter."

"You mean like what the Jedi did to Coruscant?" asked Vull.

"Exactly! And then," Veers smiled grimly, "I will make a new broadcast."

"This will only make them hunt for us harder," Sojuz pointed out.

"Let them! We've hidden here for three years. We've mined this asteroid belt. We've put up defensive stations. We've turned it into a fortress. *If* he manages to find us we'll give him a fight to remember."

It was a bold move, nothing short of shameless terrorism. Not even the rebels who'd toppled Palpatine had stooped so low. Veers passed a stern look around the table, daring anyone to defy him.

Vull wished he could offer some counter-argument but nothing came. This avenue of attack was the only thing they had left. It was the lashing-out of the defeated, but the only alternatives were surrender or death, and no one was ready for that yet.

Finally, Veers looked back up at Grave. Any friendship between the Restoration Front's leader and top admiral had dissolved years ago. Mutual desperation defined their partnership like it defined everything else.

"I want to review any plan before it's put into action," Grave said, lightly warning, "But... I agree this is a path we can look into going forward."

"Excellent." Veers grinned and looked back at his officers. "Cheer up, gentlemen. We may be beaten, but we're not dead yet."

## CHAPTER THREE

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Arquilla was, by all accounts, a pleasant world with an equitable mix of blue seas and forested continents, mild temperatures outside the poles, rich soil for farming, and a wealth of precious metals buried underneath that made it ideal for mining. Combined with its location on the Perlemian Trade Route between Lantilles and Roche, it was generally considered prime real estate.

The fact that this world had such promise made its current status all the more tragic. As *Starlight Champion* dove low over its biggest oceanside port city, Arlen Fel could see the smoke rising from the blocks of fresh rubble that marked sites of the worst local unrest.

"I didn't think it would be this bad," Arlen muttered as he banked *Champion* to the right and dove toward the coordinates he'd been sent.

"I still don't understand what they're fighting about," the young man in the co-pilot's seat shook his head.

"I've got an idea, but it'll probably be better if I let our welcoming committee explain things."

As he slowed *Champion's* approach Arlen glanced sidelong to see his passenger leaning intently forward, peering through the

viewport with evaluating eyes. Nat Skywalker was fifteen years old and big for his age. He was fast catching up on Arlen's height and his wide shoulders made him look just as massive, but that didn't hide the youth in his face. He wore his hair long and its sandy-blond color, if not the boy's build, reminded Arlen of Nat's mother. When Jade Skywalker was fifteen Arlen had played a role in her Jedi training, and having her son as an apprentice made him feel at once very proud and annoyingly old.

As *Champion* came in for a landing they got a good view of the burnt-out remains of what had once been a refinery located along the ocean coast less than ten kilometers north of the city. From the reports on the news-nets Arlen thought the violence on Arquilla had been limited to rioting and looting, but it looked like someone had dropped a few heavy explosives on this place. The tall cylindrical smokestacks were the only things standing upright. Most of the attenuate buildings and manufacturing structures had been reduced to burnt-out skeletons.

The landing pad, at least, was clear. Arlen set down beside what looked like an Incom airspeeder modified for fire-fighting and began putting his ship through cool-down procedures. Nat was eager to get out of seat and waited impatiently at the cockpit door until Arlen lowered the landing ramp and came to join him.

They descended the ramp together: one big blond-haired boy in a pale Jedi apprentice's tunic and Arlen in a brown trouser-jacket set that would have fit in anywhere in the galaxy. He no longer minded wearing homespun brown Jedi robes like he had when he'd been Nat's age, but he knew his friend outside would chide him for bad fashion sense.

Chance Calrissian was waiting for them on the landing pad along with a battered silver-skinned protocol droid. On seeing them Chance's face lit up with its familiar smile, but there was less light in it than usual. Part of it was age; Chance was getting perilously close to sixty and his close-cropped hair and beard now had more gray than black in it. He'd still aged gracefully and normally that smile could banish the years, but none of the grin reached his eyes. Chance was looking tired.



Still, he had a firm handshake. So did Arlen and so, from the little wince in Chance's smile, did Nat. At fifteen the boy felt he had to prove himself to everyone.

When Chance put his hands at his hips he finally let the smile wilt. "Thanks for coming on short notice. You can see why I called."

"I didn't know things were this bad." Arlen looked at the refinery's blackened mess looming over the landing pad. "Stang, Chance, I don't even know where to start asking about this thing."

"Who did it?" Nat piped in, "The Duros or the Tynnans?"

Chance said, "It's a little more complicated than that. Come with me. I'll show you what's left."

As they walked across the pad- three humans and a shuffling protocol droid, Arlen asked, "Where's your business partner?"

"Volgma's on Coruscant, trying to knock heads together and get the Alliance to *do* something."

"It'd be nice for everyone if he could," said Arlen.

Thirteen years ago he had been shocked when his friend combined his business interests with Volgma Enterprises and become joint-CEO of the corporation alongside a surprisingly ethical, but nonetheless very business-canny Hutt. Chance had inherited the Tendandro conglomerate from his parents and had run it like a family operation for decades, but he'd explained that a series of bad investments had combined with a temporary downturn in the galactic economy to make the merger a necessity.

When they got a better look at the wreckage of the refinery it really *did* look like the place had been hit with missiles. Arlen saw what appeared to be fire-scorched impact craters in the refinery wall, and their damage had brought the entire structure close to collapsing.

"Looks like a precision strike," Arlen said.

"That's what it was." Chance scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. "We've got sensor and security cam records so there's no doubt. Three shoulder-mounted concussion missiles. We think they were fired from that ridge over there." He pointed to a green forested rise about a half-kilometer away.

"Your security people scope the area?" asked Arlen.

"Didn't find much except some muddy footprints. They would have used either a tripod- or shoulder-mounted unit."

"I don't suppose the local government's much help."

"They've got so many problems they don't know what to do with them all."

Nat's face scrunched in confusion. "I don't understand. I thought the fighting here was between Duros and Tynnans. Why would someone want to blow up *your* refinery?"

Chance sighed. "This planet's problem isn't Duros and Tynnans fighting. They've both been living on this planet for seventy years after the Yuuzhan Vong wrecked their homeworlds. When the refugees settled here, they all prospered, but relations between species has gone downhill in the past decade."

"Because of the war in the Empire?"

The boy was smart, Arlen thought. The conflict in his brother's Empire had stopped being a real civil war four years ago and since become an asymmetric guerilla conflict, but it had still wrecked the Empire's economy which in turn had sown all sorts of havoc with its trade partners in the Alliance.

"That and more," said Chance. "Undersea mining was a big thing here and the Tynnans, being aquatic species, got rich off it. The Duros stuck to land-based industry which was why the two species got along pretty well for a while. They moved in their own separate spheres and had their own separate economies. Then the Tynnans started running out of ore deposits and the Duros companies have been taking heavy hits because they lost their clients in the Empire. One industry stalling is bad but when the *other* one is outright collapsing, well..."

"Economic meltdown," summarized Nat.

"Which leads to Arquilla's nice seventy-year social contract melting down too," Chance sighed.

"I still don't get it," said Arlen. "Who would want to smash *your* place?"

"My company's got contracts with Duros corporations on this planet and some other ones on the Duros diaspora. So I'm guessing my place was a casualty of Tynnan aggression, but I'm still hoping

you can verify that. I know I'm not going to get my investment back in this place but I'm hoping I can recoup some of my losses somehow. And for peace of mind I want to know who did it."

"I understand that." Arlen glanced at the wrecked refinery, then at his friend. "So is this a formal request for assistance by the Jedi Order?"

Chance plucked a slim datacard from his vest pocket. "I've got it in writing."

"I knew you would." Arlen took it. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. We don't get enough of those nowadays."

Chance nodded knowingly. After a series of ups and down, relations between the Jedi Order and the Galactic Alliance had been mostly positive until the disaster on Coruscant eight years ago. Using the face of Nat's father Jodram Tainer, the ancient Force abomination Abeloth had devastated the capital with a captured Alliance warship, killing millions. Despite every explanation the Jedi could give the incident had painfully blackened the Order's name. Every other day, it seemed, Nat was forced to hear his father referred to in the same black tones usually saved for Palpatine and Darth Vader, even though it had been Jodram who'd sacrificed himself to destroy Abeloth once and for all.

The young man took it best anyone could, but it was an awful burden for Nat to bear. Arlen tried to brighten the mood and added, "Well, you never know, things might change. Allana and Jade are on Coruscant now. Hopefully they'll make some headway."

"Best of luck." Chance looked at the wreckage and scowled. "Maybe Volgma and them can work together to knock in some heads."

"We've already spent two full hours this afternoon listening to entreaties from one forceful individual with commercial interests on Arquilla," Galactic Alliance triumvir Darris Sevold said tiredly. "For all our sakes, Masters Jedi, I hope you will be more *succinct*."

It wasn't the start Jade Skywalker had been hoping for, but as long as they didn't star slurring Jodram she could take it. She sat beside her cousin Allana at a short desk. The three leaders of the

Galactic Alliance were arranged at a curved table in front of them, and the endless Galactic City skyline was lighting up behind them as the last bit of day dwindled to nothing.

Allana Solo Djo was a former chief of state, former senator, and lifelong stateswoman who'd been trained by her mother and grandmother for this sort of thing since childhood. Jade decided to stay silent and let her take the lead.

"I'm sure you're being pressed from all sides on how to react to this situation," Allana said sympathetically. "I don't envy you this mess which is why we've come here today, as Jedi, not to ask anything from you but to offer our help."

"Surely you're not suggesting unrest on one world is straining our resources," said the Vurk triumvir Sevlis Morr.

"I'm well aware of what tools the Alliance can use," Allana smiled patiently. "However, I'm sure you want to avoid a military solution at all costs."

"Master Jedi, we've already sent a negotiating team led by Senator Toreena to Arquilla," Sevoid said. "She'll be sitting down with lead delegates from the Duros and Tynnan sides tomorrow. What do you think your people have to offer that our top diplomats don't?"

It was one of those questions Allana would have to answer carefully so as not to denigrate the people she was asking favors from. Jade watched as the older woman said, "I trust Senator Toreena will make excellent use of official channels. However, as you know, the situation on Arquilla is very chaotic. Different Duros and Tynnans factions are forming armed militias and there's little in the way of central authority."

"This is all true," triumvir Kyrr Esch said with a whistling sigh. "But what can the *Jedi* do for us, Allana?"

As Allana formulated her response Jade reached out with the Force to get a feeling from all three Alliance leaders. After the disaster on Coruscant eight years ago, Kyrr Esch's close relationship with Allana and the Jedi had nearly caused him to be ousted from his role as Chief of State. The Mrlssi had taken the bold step of abolishing his own position and creating a new system where the

president of the senate, the chief of the judiciary committee, and chairman of the economic council combined to make a triumvirate of elected leaders. The move had been highly controversial but won out, Jade supposed, because Davek Fel's rise to absolute power in Imperial space had spurred a movement within the Alliance to prevent any individual from seizing total control on Coruscant.

Today Esch emanated the weariness of a being who'd long ago lost confidence in his ability to handle his job. Sevold's skepticism to the Jedi was blatant; Morr was cautious and tentative. Exactly as Allana had predicted, then.

In response to Esch's question Allana said, "The Jedi can see and hear things that other beings cannot. That's why we were so instrumental in resolving hostilities in Senex-Juvex after its Rising. Master Skywalker here spent almost a decade hosting Unity and Justice Trials. She can tell you first-hand how she was able to arbitrate very nasty cases to the satisfaction of both parties."

"So you intend to supersede our negotiators, or merely work against them?" sniffed Sevold.

It took all of Jade's effort not to groan, but Allana, still polite, said, "As I'm sure you know, the Jedi Order's operations in Senex-Juvex were entirely in agreement with Alliance law and under its supervision. We're offered to do the exact same thing here. We will send Jedi where *you* tell them to go, to mediate individual conflicts where *you* choose."

The triumvirs shifted awkwardly in their seats. After the disaster on Coruscant there had been a movement in the Senate to ban the Jedi from operating on *any* Alliance member world, no exceptions. The extreme motion had lost out, but Jade knew that Senator Sevold had voted in favor. Esch and Morr had voted it down. Still, the Alliance government had not formally worked with the Jedi in eight years, leaving collaboration to happen only on request of private citizens like Chance Calrissian.

Morr tilted his green crest at Jade. "Perhaps Master Skywalker can detail a little more of her actions in the Unity and Justice Trials."

It was what Jade had come here to talk about, but she hadn't been looking forward to it. Just thinking of her quiet life on Fengrine brought back memories of Jodram. Sometimes it seemed like a paradise from which she'd been expelled.

But she took a breath and told them everything she could, using real examples wherever possible. She explained how, when questioning plaintiffs and defendants in those cases, she'd used the Force not just to sense the emotion they were hiding but to draw out their true motivations. In drawing out those motivations—publicly, before an audience—she and the other Jedi had spread empathy and understanding and softened the hard divisions between people and groups in war-torn Senex-Juvex.

"The Jedi have always been peacemakers," Jade said, knowing she risked one of them bringing up Jodram. They'd all been told what had actually happened on Coruscant that awful day, but Jade wasn't sure how much any non-Jedi could understand, let alone believe, what Abeloth was and how Jodram had stopped her from doing even worse damage. "We only want the opportunity to continue that role on Arquilla. Just as before, we'll work under Alliance law at all times."

"And if any of your people break Alliance law, will they stand punishment *under* our law?" asked Morr.

"Of course," said Allana. "Nothing we're offering hasn't been done before. We want to complement Alliance efforts to bring peace to Arquilla, not stifle them."

"If you want to keep the Duros and Tynnans from each other's throats," Sevoid said, "The most surefire way would be to undo what the Vong did to their homeworlds so they can both go back where they came from. Can your Jedi do that?"

"Not at this time," Allana said politely.

"Unfortunately no one else can either," Sevoid sighed. "Unless the Jedi have anything else to say I'd like to bring this to a vote."

"Seconded," said Morr, though he glanced at Allana and Jade as though offering them a last chance.

Allana said, "The Unity and Justice trials are proof that the Jedi can serve as mediators for the Alliance. We're willing to commit to

this project for years, even decades. That's another advantage the Jedi offer. We make choices not dictated by election cycles."

"How fortunate you have that in common with Emperor Fel," muttered Sevold. Jade fought a wince.

"We'll make the sacrifices we must to keep the peace," Allana looked at Morr imploringly. "As we always have."

"I believe," said Esch, "It is time to vote."

It went as Jade had feared and mostly expected. No from Sevold. Yes from Esch. No from Morr.

"Perhaps the time will come when we decide we *do* need the Jedi," the Vurk told them after the vote. "But for now, this is a local problem. The Alliance needs to be seen as being in control of the situation and we need to *take* control. That means that for now we rely on ourselves, not the Jedi."

Jade felt crestfallen and tried not to show it. Allana, however, stayed straight upright in her chair and asked the triumvirs, "May I offer a second proposal? I promise, it will be quick."

Sevold frowned but Morr tilted his crest toward them. "Be brief."

"I understand the optics and complications of enlisting Jedi on a large scale. As an alternative, I believe the Alliance could make good use of a *single* Jedi to help Senator Toreena's negotiating team."

"Are you volunteering for this position yourself, Allana?" chirped Kyrr Esch.

"I'm willing, though I know *my* presence would also be a big and complicated statement." She gestured to her cousin. "I was going to recommend Master Skywalker."

Jade hadn't expected that, but she stifled her surprise and immediately said, "I've just described the arbitration process I used on Fengrine. I think it can be a great asset anywhere."

Sevold made a deep, low growling noise in the back of his throat but Morr said, "We cannot permit the Jedi to pass judgments as they did in Senex-Juvex. You would be an appendage to Senator Toreena's team, an advisor and nothing else."

"The Jedi are here to serve," Jade said diplomatically.

It was almost too good a line; Sevold's face twisted a little more. Esch asked him, "Do you have anything to say, Darris?"

"It would embarrass Senator Toreena and her team to have to rely on a Jedi negotiator."

"It may still prove effective," said Morr, "And there's no cause to *announce* their last-minute addition is a Jedi."

"One reason why I suggested Master Skywalker," Allana added.

It made definite sense; Allana was one of the most recognizable beings in the galaxy but Jade had never reached the renown of her father or grandfather. She hadn't wanted to either; for so long she'd lived a quiet life on Fengrine with Jodram and after his death she'd laid low to shield her sons from the undeserved infamy heaped on their father.

Sevold glared at Morr. "You're too eager to buy what they're selling."

"And you're too eager to dismiss them," the Vurk returned.

Allana cleared her throat. "May I remind the triumvirs that we're offering to work for free."

Esch hissed, a Mrlssi chuckle. "Your point is clear. I recommend a second vote."

"Very well," Sevold sighed. "I think we know the outcome. I vote no."

"I vote in favor," said Esch.

"I'll also vote in favor." Morr looked at Jade. "We're placing great trust in you, Master Jedi."

"I won't disappoint," she said. "I promise."

When Jade and Allana stepped out of the chamber they left it alone. Senatorial guards trailed far behind as Allana led them down familiar halls out of the building.

"Not a bad start," she told Jade. "Chance Calrissian's requested help from Arlen. We'll have an extra presence on Arquilla if we need it."

"Hopefully we'll be able to work together when I'm not with the negotiating team," said Jade. When Arlen went her son Nat did too, and if he was going to get into trouble she wanted to be at his side. "Where will you go?"



"I'm going to swing by New Hapes. There's some things I have to take care of it."

Her tone was grim. "How *are* things there?"

"On *New Hapes*, fine. The Consortium itself..."

"I know. But no news for the Jedi?" The Sith had helped expel Allana's mother from the Hapan throne almost forty years ago. Their leader had personally murdered Jade's mother. There had been no definite proof of continued Sith activity in the Hapes Cluster since then, but they both believed the Sith were still there, probably helping the Consortium's young queen in her reign of terror.

"Still nothing," Allana sighed. "Believe me, if we ever *do* get proof you'll be the first to know."

Jade nodded but didn't say anything else. A part of her yearned for the Sith to reveal themselves in the Hapes Cluster; she'd been just a small child during that long-ago revolt but that tragedy had changed her life, her father's life, and Allana's life. Darth Xoran's death had brought Jade some closure for her mother but the fact that the Sith were still out there, probably sheltered in Hapes for almost forty years, meant those events were still an open wound; for Jade, for Allana, for all the Hapan people and for the Jedi Order.

One day there would be a reckoning. She was just afraid of what it might bring.

Word that Jade would be joining them on Arquilla visibly improved Nat's mood and it cheered Arlen too. He certainly needed something to boost his spirits, because his investigation into the attack on the refinery hadn't uncovered anything that the Chance's people already hadn't. From the debris it looked like three shoulder-mounted Arakyd concussion missiles had been used, but even with Jedi skills Arlen and Nat had found no trace of whoever had attacked the facility.

It had, therefore, been a dispiriting day in need of a pick-up. The beings around the galaxy who still had a positive view of the Jedi tended to view them as miracle-workers, even Chance, who knew Arlen long enough to be aware of Jedi limitations. Like a good

sport, Chance kept his disappointment from his face, though Arlen could still pick it up in the Force.

Since Chance's place had been mostly blown to pieces Arlen offered him a spot in *Starlight Champion's* spare cabin. A long day of fruitless investigation had tired Nat out and the boy retreated to his bunk earlier than usual, leaving the two grown-ups with *Champion's* hold to themselves.

Because Chance clearly needed it, and because Arlen wanted it too, the Jedi unlocked a special hatch in *Champ's* lounge and retrieved a bottle had hadn't opened in a very long time.

When he saw the label Chance's face screwed up. "Sartainaynian brandy? How long have you had *that* in reserve?"

"A while," Arlen admitted as he placed two small glasses on the table and sat down on the sofa opposite Chance. His friend was right to be shocked; that was the last of three sealed containers of Bastion's finest he'd had aboard when his old life as a Jedi Knight in the Empire had been suddenly severed. That had been eight years ago, and in the intervening time, on very select occasions, he'd worked the other two down to nothing. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of melancholy as he twisted the cap free, poured into the glasses, and slid Chance his helping.

There wasn't much to toast to tonight, so they tipped glasses wordlessly and drank.

After Chance swallowed he looked down at his half-emptied cup. "That stuff ages well."

"That it does." Arlen settled tiredly in his seat.

"When's Jade supposed to get here?"

"Two days, they said. Alliance team should be setting down.... Any hour now. So she'll have catch-up to do."

"I appreciate you and Nat coming here. And staying."

"Sorry we couldn't do more."

"I'm sure Jade will help."

"Yeah." Arlen took a smaller sip. "I was going to send Marin a message. Ask her if she can turn up anything."

"Ah." Chance's grey brows rose just a little. "And where is she nowadays?"

"Last I talked to her she was in the Outer Rim. Arkanis Sector, I think. That was about two weeks ago."

"So she still gets around. Jedi business?"

"She goes where they send her."

"Did they get her a partner or is she still working alone?"

"Alone. She likes it that way, actually."

"Hmmm..." Chance refrained from comment and took another sip.

"She'll drop what she's doing and help us on this one, though," Arlen added.

He didn't want his friend getting wrong ideas. Just like his father Lando, Chance had groomed his child to succeed him in running the company. Even now she was apparently on Commenor, overseeing their biggest manufacturing operation. With Marin things were more complicated; she'd spent her first fourteen years on Bastion training to be a Jedi along with her cousins Vitor and Roan, but Arlen's expulsion from Imperial space- in addition to other experiences- had upended Marin's life just when she needed a clear path. The ensuing years had been a struggle and she'd never felt at home on Ossus. After becoming a full Jedi Knight two years ago she'd volunteered to do long-range missions for the Order, mostly in Outer Rim backwaters most Jedi hadn't even heard of. Arlen had relished that kind of adventure in his younger days and he didn't hold Marin's choice against her. He still talked with his daughter, not infrequently, but it had been months since they'd met face-to-face.

"What do you think Marin can do for us?" asked Chance.

"Those Arakyd missile launchers must have come from *somewhere* and they probably came with some other nasty staff. Marin can poke around and see if there's any buzz about weapons shipments to Arquilla. She's got all sorts of connections."

"Connections like her mom?"

"Among others." Best Arlen knew, Tamar was still on Mandalore with the rest of the Skirata clan, though it had been over a year since they'd talked.

"Well, glad to see you still make it a family affair," Chance said and sipped a little more brandy. "Hopefully she'll swing by at some point."

"Hopefully," Arlen repeated. "It'd be good for Nat too."

While Nat's and Marin's paths didn't cross that often, it was clear that the apprentice had a special admiration for his cousin. In Marin, Nat saw a Jedi who was brave enough to go off into the galaxy on her own, having the kinds of adventures any apprentice would dream of. They were also relatively close in age- seven years apart- so her lessons carried a certain relatability that old man Arlen's didn't. More surprisingly, Marin seemed to enjoy Nat's admiration. She'd never made close friends with the other Jedi apprentices on Ossus but she'd at least bonded with the Skywalker boy.

"Nat seems to be holding his own," Chance observed. "Where's Kol nowadays?"

Kol Skywalker was eleven years old and growing fast but he was still too young to pick up a lightsaber and go adventuring like his big brother. "Zonama Sekot. I hear he likes it more than Ossus."

"Ah. Your mom still there?"

"That's right."

"How's she holding up?"

Arlen looked down at the amber-tinted bottom of his glass. The loss of his father had been sudden, shocking. The great Jaina Solo Fel was ninety-one years old now; when her time came it would be less startling but still difficult. So much of his family had slipped away already, even ones still alive.

"She's holding out. It's been... hard. You know. With everything in the Empire. And one of her best friends passed on a couple years ago. But she's never liked to let it show."

"How often does she talk with Davek or her grandsons?"

"I don't know. Not often."

There was a question waiting to be asked, and to his credit, Chance didn't hesitate. "How long since *you* talked to your brother?"

He rolled around the taste of Imperial brandy in his mouth; it always made him weak with nostalgia. "A couple years."

Chance exhaled and finished the last of his glass. "Can you spare a little more, or are you saving for special occasions?"

"This is special enough," Arlen said, and meant it.

This wasn't a happy occasion, but it was important. He'd never entirely fit in with the Imperial knights on Bastion but being severed from them had hurt more than he'd anticipated; it had hurt his daughter even more. In a life that too often felt separated from itself it was good to sit down with a friend he'd known for fifty years and who'd be there tomorrow. Arlen hefted the brandy bottle and poured a little more.

The galaxy was a huge place with habitable planets too numerous to count. The aftermath of the Yuuzhan Vong War had sent refugees from ruined worlds like Duro and Tynna to verdant unsettled ones like Arquilla. Decades later the exiles from the Hapes Cluster who'd stayed loyal to Queen Mother Tenel Ka had found their own planet to settle on. With Allana's guidance, the Alliance had provided them with a green world in the Inner Rim, not far from Berchest. It lacked the rich natural resources of planets like Arquilla but the approximately one million Hapan exiles who'd first settled there were nothing compared to the trillions unsettled by the Yuuzhan Vong.

Allana could never think of the name 'New Hapes' without feeling a twinge of irony; it was in every way different from the Hapes she'd known. The Hapan Consortium she'd grown up in his been secluded and ossified for centuries. Its natural wealth had provided a cushion for its aristocracy to grow indolent and through indolence become petty, vain, and ruthless. Though she'd devoted thirty years of her adult life to leading and reforming Hapes, Allana's mother had never loved that world or its people.

New Hapes and its people were neither indolent nor vain. The original refugees, so many of them members of Allana's broad extended family, had settled the world with little more than the clothes on their backs and the equipment in their ships. The

Alliance had donated funds and supplies but in the end, New Hapes' cities were plain, recalling only echoes of the splendors back home. An entire generation of two million men and women had grown up for whom Hapes was only a childhood echo or something totally unseen and for the ossified social structures were only a strange legend. When Allana walked the streets in New Hapes' central colony she saw men and women mixing freely as equals. While centuries of selective breeding still produced a people more attractive than average the precise makeup, proud jewelry, and expensive shimmersilk robes had been replaced by a more functional appearance.

As the final proof of how different New Hapes was from the old, when Allana went to speak with its leadership she met not to some scheming set of aristocrats but a collection of a half-dozen men and women elected by their male and female peers. This council managed life for the citizens of New Hapes in a manner as equitable as anything one could expect from a Galactic Alliance member world, but vestiges of the old remained.

They still looked on Allana with veneration and two years ago, after her mother's passing, she had been crowned rightful Queen of Hapes in the most formal and elaborate ceremony ever seen on this colony world. It was not a throne she was wholly comfortable with, any more than Tenel Ka had been, but like her mother Allana knew she had to sit on it and guide from it the best she could. As a cruel irony, expulsion had allowed this community to rid itself of so much of the historic baggage that had kept the old Hapes trapped in the past. Damage and loss had conferred freedom to the exiles and with freedom possibility.

Now they just had to decide what to do with it. Old ties were still strong; they were New Hapans but still Hapan, which meant much of what had occupied them had to do with events in the Consortium.

When she came to New Hapes after her meeting on Coruscant, Allana sat down at the round table with the elected councilors and listened to the latest briefing from Tanith Zel. Tanith was about the same age as Jade but taller, with sharp facial features and red hair

that marked her as Allana's relation. Like Jade, she'd been a child during the usurper's revolt and lost even more. Her mother Taryn and her father Zekk had both been killed in those events, and though the younger woman rarely let it show Allana knew deep grief still drove her desire to retake Hapes.

For that reason Allana had placed Tanith in charge of monitoring all events in the Consortium, and for over a decade she'd managed a complex network of spies and informants feeding information to the exile community. It was through her that this council had been told of Princess Serissa Lohr's unexplained death, which had become an even more inexplicable when she'd reappeared. They'd learned of the usurper queen Demia's real death, supposedly by poison, and the great purge of the aristocracy that had followed. Many in the exile community had watched the early stages of Queen Serissa's brutal reign with a kind of sadistic glee. Duch after ducha who'd sided with Demia against Tenel Ka had been imprisoned or killed. After a few months it had become clear that Serissa was going beyond a ruthless house-cleaning. Her purges were dismantling the ancient aristocracy itself. Entire worlds had been turned into labor camps for families of deposed artistocrats. The military and security apparatus had been culled of anyone not fanatically loyal to Serissa herself. The new queen had finally found a solution for the scheming petty nobles who'd dogged Tenel Ka and other past queens: liquidation.

Once the nobles realized the extent of the new queen's ambitions some had found allies in the military. Some had fought back; others had tried to make fortresses of their homeworlds. Serissa had responded with expected brutality.

Over the past eight years the entire galaxy had watched the Empire struggle through a nasty civil war. Far fewer were aware that a similar thing had been happening in the Hapes Cluster. The parallels were in some ways chilling. Two new monarchs worked rapidly to gather central control under themselves. Hold-outs who didn't want to lose their old privileges fought back. Outright military conflict ensued, and after years and years the tattered remnants of the Hapan aristocracy were much like Moff Veer's

people: rebels who'd lost the hope of victory, fighting only from desperation and revenge.

In the beginning the Hapan exiles had adamantly refused to help Queen Serissa's enemies. These were, after all, the same women who'd expelled them and killed their families. Only when reports revealed the full scale of Serissa's brutality did they start to consider any aid. By the time Tanith started a pipeline of information and supplies with the rebels they were broken beyond hope.

"At this point there are only two worlds left with Hapan loyalist presence," Tanith explained to the council, using the name ironically claimed by the aristocrats holding out against Serissa. "Only one of those has a major base. We don't think Serissa has found it yet but it may only be a matter of time."

"What defenses does the planet have?" asked one of the councilors.

"What's left of the loyalist fleet, which at this point comes down to a handful of support cruisers. There's no way they'd withstand a full siege by Serissa's fleet, but they'll have no choice but to fight to the death."

It was another eerie echo of the situation in Davek Fel's Empire. "Tanith, do we know how many loyalists are on these worlds?" asked Allana.

"The smaller world has less than a thousand. The larger? I'd say around one hundred thousand."

Grim looks passed around the conference room. Everyone was aware that the loyalists had been ruthlessly culled but none had realized there were so few left. The exiles on New Hapes outnumbered their old enemies thirty to one. As Allana felt that sober discomfort pass around the room she felt a new feeling: sympathy, born from pity for a badly defeated and former enemy.

"Do you know the location of the last major base?" asked Allana.

"I do," Tanith said simply. As a matter of policy, Tanith revealed only the most essential details of her operations to the council. She'd kept the name of the world secret even from Allana.

"Miss Zel," said a councilor, "Please, be out with your proposal."



"I think the time for bitterness is long past," Tanith said gravely. "If we ever want to liberate Hapes we should start by liberating the loyalists. We should do everything we can to evacuate them from the Consortium and bring them here."

They'd all expected that, and after giving it a moment to sink in another councilor raised the first rebuttal. "A hundred thousand people is still a staggering number, especially if we have to extract them from inside hostile territory. We simply don't have the resources."

"We *definitely* don't have the firepower," added another.

"I know." Tanith looked to Allana. "The only alternative is to ask the Alliance for help."

"That... may be a challenge," Allana said. Her own mixed relationship with the triumvirate aside, the Alliance would be rightfully wary of something that could start a war with Serissa.

"Your Majesty, please." Tanith faced Allana squarely, addressing her one-on-one. "We have to at least try. If we're going to put the Hapan people together again we have to start now."

Allana looked in her eyes. They were so like her mother Taryn's, so like those of the older woman who'd watched over Allana as a child and ultimately given her life to protect her. She knew Tanith's hatred for those who'd killed her parents ran deep. Her desire to unify her broken people ran even deeper. Allana knew Tanith had agonized over this decision for days before bringing it before the council and her queen.

Allana also knew she'd brought this before the council as a formality. The council governed things on New Hapes but the real decision in the hands of Allana Solo Djo, queen of a world she hadn't seen in forty years.

It wasn't a power she savored. Right now she wished she could throw it away. But what she saw in Tanith's eyes- in Taryn's- gave Allana only one real choice.

"I will talk to the triumvirate and our friends in the military," Allana said. "And I'll talk to the Jedi as well. You're right. What happened in the past is past. We need to start putting our people together again."

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Tanith's eyes brightened and she allowed herself a proud smile. And Allana, though she knew all the difficulties that might lay ahead, smiled back.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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The planet Reboam had turned its daylit side to face the approaching ships, and to them it seemed like a bright red jewel dead ahead. Darth Terrid knew better; its surface was a dry wasteland of iron dust with just enough atmosphere to be breathable. It was sparsely settled and located on the outer edges of the Hapes Cluster, so it unsurprising that one of the last shelters for the so-called Hapan loyalists was here.

By Terrid's estimate the souls down below had less than an hour to live. It had taken great effort to find this base and he could feel the eagerness, the bloodthirst, in the crew of the ships around him. Darth Saydel- Queen Serissa Lohr to her billions of followers- had used her struggle against Hapes' old aristocracy to hone her military into a fanatically loyal fighting force. Saydel's Sith power had only been one of her tools; she'd proven herself a master political manipulator and had roused the lower classes of Hapes' ossified society by fashioning herself as their savior.

It was therefore with the fervor of the liberated and vengeful that Darth Saydel's soldiers gathered around Reboam and prepared to fall upon it like hungry neks. Darth Xoran, who'd established the Sith presence in Hapes all those years ago, would have been proud.

Darth Terrid would feel the hunger of the soldiers packed into sleek *Nova*-class battle cruisers and swift Miy'til fighters gathered around him, but he was not aboard their ships. Darth Saydel wisely kept the existence of her Sith allies a well-guarded secret. The commanders of those vessels knew only that the three *Fury*-class starfighters at the head of the attack force contained their Queen's most trusted executioners. The Sith were here to make sure not a single so-called loyalist escaped Reboam.

Sitting in the cockpit of his fighter, Terrid patched the coordinates provided by Saydel's spies into his computer. His sensors began scanning the appropriate section of the dusty red planet down below and when they started returning data he turned on his comlink to speak to the other two Sith Lords who'd accompanied him.

"I've scanned the location provided but my sensors report nothing," he told them.

"Nor mine," said Darth Inexor from Terrid's right flank.

"We should get closer to the surface," suggested Darth Tigran. "They're sure to have jammers and camouflage erected around their base."

"Agreed. Stand by to approach." Terrid switched his comm channel and hailed the lead Hapan warship. "*Black Majesty*, this is Fury One. I need to speak to the admiral."

"At once, Fury One," the voice on the other side- young, male- replied. These vermin knew nothing of what their queen's elite fighters really were, but they obeyed without question.

A new voice came on, older and female. "This is Admiral Vahl. Report, Fury One."

"Our sensors show no signs of life at the location specified."

"Neither do ours."

"We will take our fighters down and scout the area. Hold in orbit and wait for our signal. If any ships try to leave the planet, destroy them."

"Yes, Fury One."

As Terrid clicked off the comlink he felt a surge of power. Leritta Vahl had served Darth Saydel's grandmother as well and the

woman had taken to the new queen's brutal reforms with surprising eagerness. It was a thrill that the old admiral, who'd been commanding ships since before Terrid was born, accepted his order so readily and passed them on to her thousands of soldiers. For so long he'd served Darth Krayt's One Sith on the promise that the Dark Side was a pathway to true supremacy. It was only when making his pact with then-princess Serissa, training her to become Darth Saydel and helping her rule Hapes with a bloody iron first, that he'd started feeling the thrill of true power that he'd been promised long ago.

He looked forward to more of that power soon, but first, Reboam needed taking care of. He signaled the other two Sith Lords and together their fighters fell toward the planet. The rest of the Hapan fleet remained stationary behind them, patiently waiting to kill and die as their Sith masters commanded.

Reboam was a miserable place. Storms of red dust whipped through the thin air and got so dense they blocked out the sun at midday. When the storms died down the sun returned, baking the surface dry. At night the temperature dropped past freezing in a matter of minutes. The only water existed deep below the surface. Since coming to this world almost a year ago, Elliah Chalk had spent every day peeking through the small slit windows of the loyalist's base, a mostly-underground facility shielded from outside eyes by elaborate sensor-jamming fields. The surface of Reboam was a barren thing but the sky, when clear of dust storms, was a perfect crystal blue, just like the sky of Hapes. When Elliah looked out those windows she could at least remember.

She'd been eight years old when Serissa Lohr became queen of the Hapes Consortium. She'd been nine when she'd fled the world forever. The year in between remained the most vivid and horrific of her life. Her mother Lenor was a distant cousin of the queen's and at the very start that had protected their family, but the purges had grown wider and deeper. Elliah could remember the growing dread in her mother right until the day when Lenor, too, had been arrested in the palace and publicly executed. The same fate would

have fallen on Elliah, even though she was just a child, but distant relatives she barely knew had spirited her offworld. They'd also taken her younger brother Hogrum, her last link to her family and her old life.

The sky was mercifully clear that day and Elliah was sitting by the window beneath the base's sole external observation tower when she felt Hogrum coming.

Hogrum was three years younger than her, just fourteen, but big for his age and a half-head taller. Like Elliah, like their relative the murderous queen, he had pale skin and black hair. He came up to the horizontal window-strip and looked out at the sky but said nothing, though she could tell something was getting to him. She could always tell what Hogrum was feeling, even when they were apart. It had been that way since as long as either of them could remember and it had taken Elliah by surprise when she'd realized it wasn't like that for anyone else. When her mother had learned this, Lenor had furiously told both children never to speak of it to anyone.

That was one of Elliah's last memories of her mother and it hadn't been until years later, when she and Hogrum were with the other loyalist families constantly fleeing Serissa's fleets, that she started to wonder whether she and her brother might be bound by the so-called Force. The Hapans had purged themselves of Force-users before she was born and the word *Jedi* was the worst kind of curse. As a child she hadn't been sure they were even real. The realization that she might not have been so different from the hated Jedi had been the first moment of alienation with the other loyalists, but not the last. The old families with whom she sheltered stubbornly tried to pretend they were still aristocrats. They forced most males to act as menial laborers, save the prettiest whom they made into baubles, even though Elliah knew her little brother was smarter and more capable than most of the grown-up women he served. Even hiding on this barren backwater they tried to live like royals in the Fountain Palace. Elliah couldn't decide whether to hate or pity them.

She hated Reboam, hated her fugitive life, hated the people she lived it with, except for Hogrum. Her only escape was watching the blue sky, but she couldn't feel at peace doing that, not when her brother was sitting sullen next to her and refusing to clarify the discomfort she clearly felt.

It looked like she needed to take the lead, so she asked, "What's wrong, Hogrum?"

"I don't know," her brother mumbled. "I just know something's off."

Elliah wondered how he could pick just *one* wrong thing, but asked, "When did that feeling start?"

"Just today. I don't know why."

"Maybe you ate something bad last night."

"Maybe," he snorted. They'd eaten the same thing day after day for months, just like everyone else on Reboam. They could only grow so much in the base's underground hydroponics center.

They heard the sound of pounding feet above, coming down the stairs of the observation tower. They both turned to the stairwell door to see open. The woman who came through made it almost to the second stairs leading down into the base when she finally noticed the teenagers.

"Masters Chalk, please come with me." The woman sounded breathless and not from the stairs.

"What's wrong?" asked Hogrum.

"*Please*, Masters, come with me," she waved.

Elliah tugged Hogrum by the sleeve and both of them followed the woman down the stairs. Once she reached the hallway below she gestured for them to follow and broke into a run. Elliah did the same as Hogrum cried out behind her, "What's going on? *Please* tell us!"

"There's a fleet in orbit," the woman panted without looking back.

"We're under attack?" asked Elliah.

"They haven't launched yet. But even if they can't find our base they know we're down here, somewhere..."

When they reached the entrance to the turbolift that would take them down further still, into the belly of the subterranean base, Elliah felt a chill. She might never see blue sky again. This hiding place, encased in metal and buried under layers of red dust and stone, could well become her grave.

"What do we do?" Elliah said weakly as the lift rushed up to meet them.

The woman looked back at the teenagers and her face softened in sorrow. "Pray," she said.

The sensor-jamming equipment the loyalists had was sophisticated and effective, but in the end nothing could hide the stubby gray observation tower jutting out from the plane of red dust. The observation post wouldn't be all: there had to be a structure beneath it and, most importantly, the entrance to some hangar, probably masked by camouflage netting, where the loyalists kept their ships.

That was the primary target, so as soon as the Sith spotted the watchtower they broke formation and scattered low over the surface to find the hidden hangar. Terrid reduced speed and reached out with the Force for hints his sensors couldn't provide. He felt living beings deep below and a surge of panic from a thousand minds, but nothing to specifically direct him.

It was Darth Tigran who called, "To me! I've found it!"

Terrid wheel his Fury over to the other Sith's vessel. Tigran was flying tight circles high above a patch in the red plain that looked exactly like the rest to Terrid's eyes, but when his and Inexor's fighters joined up, Tigran swooped into a dive and fired a chain of laser blasts. They threw up a burst of red dust and black smoke and when Tigran pulled around for another pass, Terrid saw black scorch marks scarring a set of heavy blast doors big enough to let a medium heavy transport through.

They'd come here to bring destruction and they didn't hesitate before forming up and dropping a full barrage of concussion missiles into the blast doors. The explosions finally ripped through and the three Sith fighters dove through the blown-open portal and



into the hangar. It was a wide space with a half-dozen big transports parked in a row, plus some twenty battered Miy'til fighters and an assortment of shuttles.

There were people on the deck who'd just started to prepare some ships for take-off. Some stared in shock at the strange Sith fighters that had just blown into their hanger; some pointed; a handful raised small arms and fired frantic shots that panged helplessly off the Furies' armor.

The people they could deal with later. Skimming just beneath the hangar ceiling, the three Sith fighters cut a strafing run across the line of parked transports. Laser blasts tore through their unshielded hulls, spilling fire and smoke that quickly filled the confined space. The Sith pivoted a tight turn and delivered a second volley of laserfire that took out the Miy'tils. Fighters with warheads loaded burst into fireballs that shook the entire hangar and sent the frantic defenders tumbling off their feet.

It was the perfect time to land. Terrid send a wordless signal through the Force and all three Furies set down at an open space in the hangar deck near the ruined rows of Miy'tils. By the time they opened their cockpits and bounded into the smoke air a few Hapans had staggered to their feet and started shooting through the haze.

Darth Inexor was already moving toward them with a fast and animal grace. The young Codru-Ji was counted as the One Sith's finest duelist, in no small part because he possessed twice the arms of usual combatants. Terrid could feel the Hapan defenders freeze with dread and disbelief as the alien rose before them and ignited four lightsabers at once. Before they could overcome their shock Inexor was in motion, a whirlwind of deadly red light.

As the Codru-Ji handled their immediate enemies Terrid and Tigran joined in the Force to push the smoke filling the hangar up through the blown-open blast doors. More smoke furled out from the burning transports and broken Miy'tils but it bought them a minute of breathable air and send a black signal out for Admiral Vahl to see.

As Inexor finished off the Hapans, Terrid brought out his personal comlink and routed a signal via the transmitter on his fighter. "*Black Majesty*, this is Fury One. Entrance is secure. Do you have our position?"

"Yes, Fury One. We've got your smoke signal."

"Hold off landing. Wait for our next hail."

"Understood, Fury One."

Terrid pocketed his comlink and hurried to the hangar exit, where the other two Sith Lords already stood with sabers blazing. Darth Tigran's single red blade looked meager compared to Inexor's four, but Terrid knew the Zabrak was as formidable a fighter as they came, and especially skilled with telekineses. Fearsome black tattoos lined his green face and marked him as raised One Sith from birth, unlike Terrid and Inexor. Despite the difference the three of them had worked together for years as Darth Saydel's vanguard. If Terrid's intelligence was correct, this was the first of two loyalist bases remaining in the entire Consortium. All their bloody work was almost over.

Until they called for backup it would be three Sith against a thousand Hapan loyalists. It would be a challenge, but Terrid wanted to hunt down and kill the leaders himself. Once the head was cut off, Admiral Vahl's vermin could finish the body.

Terrid reached out with the Force and felt anxious minds moving just beyond the wall. The Hapans knew the hangar was lost and were setting up some brave defense.

"Do you think there is a second hangar for the leaders?" asked Tigran.

"The old duchar would never want to die with the peasants," Terrid grinned. "There will be a second, private hangar with escape vessels. We find it and we leave none alive."

"Very good. Shall we begin?" Inexor bore sharp fangs, belying his canine ancestry. Terrid knew the sight of three aliens- four-armed Codru-Ji, horned Zabrak, and red-eyed Chiss- would strike primal terror in the Hapans, most of whom had never seen a non-human outside of monsters in holo-dramas.

"Please start," Terrid said and drew his weapon at last. After the One Sith had captured him all those years ago he'd kept using the shell of the lightsaber he'd built as a Jedi apprentice on Bastion. That was another lifetime ago, another self. Even the saber itself had been destroyed. The new one he'd built for himself had a shell not of metal but obsidian stone sharpened to deadly point on the pommel-end.

As its red blade hummed to life in his hand, Darth Inexor moved forward and began tearing through the blast doors in a storm of red. Terrid and Tigran used the Force to blow the heavy metal outward, right into defenders waiting outside. A blaze of laserfire exploded at them but the Sith did not hesitate, did not doubt. They charged in with fury and dealt destruction to all who stood in their way.

When word came that the enemy had smashed into the main hangar, the reaction was swift. Ducha Alrau ordered her loyal defenders to meet the attackers and do everything possible to stop them. Then Alrau and the other senior nobles gathered their families and hurried in the opposite direction, toward the hidden secondary hangar where a handful of fast escape craft were located.

Even with the heavy transports there was no way to evacuate the nearly one thousand loyalists hiding on Reboam. Reports coming from the main hangar were confused and garbled, but it sounded as though all ships had been destroyed. Reports also said the attack fleet hadn't budged from orbit. Nothing made sense; all Elliah knew was what she would very likely die here

Death would have been certain if she and Hogrum hadn't been born royal. Young though they were, their blood relation to Serissa meant they were especially valuable to the loyalist leaders. Though Ducha Alrau had never outright said it, Elliah suspected the white-haired old woman had prepared Elliah herself as a plausible replacement after removing the current queen.

Deposing Serissa may have been possible in the beginning, but by now it was a lost dream. The best they could hope for was to survive another day.

Elliah and Hogrum had been brought to the chamber where the other senior nobles gathered. Most of them were older women, still dressed in the embroidered gowns and shimmering robes they'd salvaged when forced to flee their palaces years ago. All their gaudiness seemed darkly comic as they moved frantically around the room, gathering their belongings, barking out orders to their retainers, or hovering next to the communications console where a frazzled male technician- one of Ducha Alrau's younger brothers, Elliah understood- was trying to get a grasp of what was happening

"The fleet in orbit still hasn't moved," the man shook his graying head. "They must have sent a strike force ahead to break through."

"What are the forward teams saying?" asked Ducha Alrau.

"And why hasn't the damned fleet moved?" hissed another noble.

The technician tapped his earpiece as he cycled through different comm channels and tried to make sense of the confusion. "They're taking heavy losses. They're falling back. They're talking about.... Monsters."

"Monsters?" asked Hogrum, who nestled close to the console beside his sister.

"Aliens," the man said darkly. "Or... Jedi."

"Jedi?" Elliah couldn't believe it.

"There's some talk about aliens with *lightsabers*," the man looked up at Alrau with rising horror. "Madam, they're *slaughtering* our first lines."

"Which way are they headed?" asked Alrau.

He swallowed. "They seemed to be coming this way, Madam."

"Then we need to muster our ships and run," said the Ducha.

"What about the fleet in orbit?" asked Hogrum.

The old woman looked at him disdainfully, like someone so young and so male should have known to hold his tongue. Elliah said, "We can't run with that fleet out there, can we?"

"If they're coming for us we have no choice." Alrau mustered all her battered aristocratic dignity and raised her voice for all the room to hear. "We must fall back to the ships at once! We must hope we can run the blockade and escape!" A few other women

cried out objections but Alrau said, "There's no time to dawdle! Hurry!"

Elliah grabbed her brother's arm and kept him close as the nobles started a messy escape from the chamber. Alrau was one of the first ones out and she ordered her two male retainers to keep the Chalk siblings close. The tall, athletic men each had stun-pikes and sidearms, but as they hurried the siblings down the hall toward the hangar Elliah didn't know what good they could do. The loyalists had long believed that Serissa used some elite warriors as vanguards when she attacked her enemies but no one had ever learned anything about them. The reason was simple: no one who ever faced these vanguards survived. Their few spies within Serissa's forces couldn't find out anything else; they only knew that once these elites attacked, there was no hope of escape. That Serissa had enlisted Jedi- those feared, half-mythic monsters from generations past- was at once incredible and horribly believable.

Even as they were jostled about by the crowd flowing toward the hangar Elliah reached out with the sense she and her brother shared. She felt his confusion and dread and tried to muster some confidence to share with him. It was hard to find, but they were luckier than the hundreds of lesser blood who had no hope of escaping Reboam at all.

The crowd of nobles was almost at the hangar when the slaughter began. The sound of laserfire started far behind Elliah and Hogrum; then came screams from the dying. Below that was a chorus of low humming sounds she couldn't place, but it was quickly drowned out by cries of panic from the nobles rushing for the hangar. Hogrum and Elliah clung to each other as they were swept along, and their two guards kept close and shielded them from behind.

When they burst into the hangar old nobles and their retainers were all scampering as fast as they could for any of the three sleek, emerald-hulled shuttles. Two more sweep-winged Miy'tils sat in the corner of the hangar to act as escorts, though what two snubfighters could do against an entire fleet Elliah didn't know.

She spotted Ducha Alrau standing on the central shuttle's lowered landing ramp. More women were rushing past her into its hold but she scanned the messy crowd until her eyes met Elliah's.

"Come!" she shouted and waved. Elliah and Hogrum tried to move for her but were mostly pushed by their two retainers through the frenzy, toward the waiting shuttle.

That was when the hangar filled with screams. Elliah spun around and saw a blaze at entrance. Swords of red light spun and danced, cutting down old women in gowns, young male retainers, guards whose every rifle-blast was deflected by the three nimble attackers. As Elliah's own guards tried to push her to the shuttle she was frozen in awe as the bodies fell and these three merciless, deadly warriors became visible.

The first one she spotted was like a human, but a crown of horns jutted out from a green-skinned head that was marked by vicious black tattoos like primitive tribal markings. As she watched him, the alien cleaved one old noble apart at the waist, deflected two shots from an armored guard with his blade, then thrust one hand toward her, palm-out. She was suddenly lifted off her feet and thrown into another guard so hard both their armor cracked.

The second attacker was even more hideous. It had four thin arms and a red sword blazed in each hand. Longer legs propelled it through the crowd and into the air, and to Elliah's awed eyes it seemed to throw itself impossibly high and impossibly far, until it came down on the roof of the central shuttle. Its blades swept out, effortlessly ripping through the ship's armored hull and bursting essential equipment. Then the alien bounded down to the cockpit, sliced through its transparisteel with a few fast strokes, and dropped inside, where it began slaughtering all the old nobles sheltering inside.

The third Jedi- if that was what these were- bounded right toward the central shuttle. This one looked almost human, if not for the deep blue tone of his skin and the red glow of his eyes. Elliah had heard of aliens like that, heard their name, but in her panic she couldn't recall. Her two guards pushed her toward the shuttle and began shooting at the red-eyed alien. The creature raised his free

hand, palm-out again, and Elliah felt a wave of force pull her off her feet and throw her into the air. Her guards went flying too; so did Hogrum. She spotted him, hurled toward the opposite wall, right before she hit the ground hard shoulder-first and skidded across the deck. She rolled onto her back and pushed herself upright just in time to see the horned alien drop out of nowhere and cut the heads off both her guards.

These weren't Jedi; these were *monsters*.

Elliah turned away from them and ran. She sprinted toward the shuttle on the far right side of the hangar just as an invisible hand lifted the heavy craft off its landing struts, raised it toward the ceiling, then threw it onto the nearby Miy'til fighter.

The concussive shock threw her off her feet, washed scorching heat over her, drowned out her hearing. The world became a soundless spiral of light and smoke and people dying. Elliah tried to stand, fell back down, then scrambled on all fours across the debris-strew floor, desperate to get as far away from the monsters as she could. When she looked over her shoulder she saw, through the fire and smoke, the four-armed alien walk proudly down the ramp of the central shuttle. Sabers still blazed in three of its hands. In the fourth it lifted what something round, something white. When Elliah looked back a second time she realized it was Ducha Alrau's head.

She saw a chunk of debris ahead, the torn-off wing of the destroyed Miy'til slanted against the far wall, and rushed for it. She forced herself not to look back, not to even think of the monsters behind her, the monsters who'd kill her any second. When she got close to the Miy'til's wing she let herself fall back and slid the last few meters that took her under the wing's curve. Her feet slammed into the wall hard, but stayed there, curled up and terrified but hidden.

Then she felt Hogrum. He was calling to her; she called back to him. She tried to tell him she was safe and hidden and she realized he was communicating the same thing. She told him to stay where he was, to keep absolutely silent and still because there was no telling if these monsters could find them.

She did the same. She stayed pressed between the wall and broken wing, eyes shut, clinging to her brother in her mind and praying the monsters didn't find them. She listened to a few more sparks of laserfire, more humming from those horrible red lightsabers, and the soft thud of the last few bodies hitting the floor. When things finally went quiet she stayed as she was: still cowering, still praying, still clinging tight to Hogrum, still more terrified than she'd ever been in her life.

Those she didn't dare peek her head out to look, she knew the monsters were still in the hangar, basking in their bloody victory.

Terrid couldn't help but feel triumph swell inside as he looked on the carnage around them. Burning wreckage filled half the hangar with smoke. Dozens of bodies lay strewn across the floor, mostly old female nobles who'd run for their ships and left hundreds of retainers and servants to die without a thought. These creatures were vermin among vermin and Terrid took no small pleasure in ridding the universe of their petty filth.

He walked around the deck, examining the bodies for possible survivors. He spotted the twitching hand of one guard lying prone on her back, nimbly stepped over, and drove the tip of his blade through her spine, right between the shoulders. She shuddered and died. He withdrew the blade and checked a few more bodies, all clearly dead.

The other Sith Lords did the same. Inexor had sheathed three of his lightsabers but used the last to stab a few more dying bodies. With his fourth hand he still held the ducha's severed head by the hair. Tigran kicked over the corpse of one old woman and stared contemptuously down at its face.

"It is good to rid the galaxy of these," the Zabrak said.

"I was thinking the same," Terrid said. He deactivated his lightsaber and bent over the guard he'd just killed. "It seems our mission is accomplished."

"You should call in the fleet then," said Inexor. "They will handle the rest."



"Indeed." Terrid hooked his lightsaber to his belt and drew out his comlink. "*Black Majesty*, this is Fury One."

"We hear you, Fury One," Admiral Vahl said.

"The nobles are all dead. You may begin landing your troops to finish the rest."

"Very good, Fury One. Your help is appreciated as always."

"We live to serve," Terrid said with faint irony, then turned the comm off.

Just as the Hapans served Darth Saydel, all the One Sith served the dreams of Darth Krayt. Even now the ancient ex-Jedi lay sleeping in his stasis chamber on Shedu Maad, passing commands through the Force to his regent and messenger, Darth Wyyrlok. To be One Sith was to serve Krayt's dream faithfully, trusting their obedience would bring about a galaxy under Sith rule, even if it was generations away.

Those like Darth Tigran, raised One Sith from birth, seemed to find it easy to reconcile that selfless faith with the ambitions stirred by the Dark Side of the Force. For Terrid it had never been so. Still crouched over the dead guard he looked up at the other Sith. Inexor stood two meters behind Tigran, the dead Ducha's head dangling lazily at his side.

"We should retreat to our fighters and depart," said Tigran. "The vermin will do the rest."

"I'm ready," said Inexor. "I've already claimed my souvenir."

Tigran turned around and looked down at the severed head. "You're always one for trophies, aren't you?"

"They're valued by my people," the Codru-Ji said.

"Your people are the Sith," Darth Tigran reminded.

Inexor lifted the head high and examined the old woman's face. Death had frozen it in a look of pathetic shock. "You're right. I have enough trophies. This one can be yours."

He tossed the severed head. Darth Tigran, on instinct, reached out to catch it against his chest. By the time it left Inexor's hand Terrid had already scooped up the dead guard's blaster rifle. Just as the Tigran caught the head three lasers caught him in the back, right between the shoulders. He staggered and dropped the head

but didn't fall. Terrid rose, rifle in both hands, and fired off one more shot that blew out the side of the Zabrak's horned head. Finally, Darth Tigran crumpled dead with all the fallen vermin.

Inexor took a deep breath and held Terrid's eyes across the body. They'd discussed this, planned it, prepared for months, but it was still no small thing to murder another Sith. Terrid had only done it twice before. The first had been his former teacher Darth Avanc, eight years back. The second time it had been just eight months ago and on a mission just like this. That death, like this one, could be easily attributed to vermin. Just like Tigran, just like Avanc, that second kill had been another born-Sith, another loyal servant of Krayt, another powerful warrior who was best put down before Darth Terrid put his final plans in motion.

"We should take his body with us," said Inexor.

Terrid reached out with the Force to make sure there were no unwanted survivors. Quickly satisfied, he tossed his rifle on top of the dead guard and said, "I agree. Now let's get out of here."

Inexor bent low and scooped up Tigran's body in his long strong arms. Terrid led the way as the two Sith marched back toward their ships. From there they'd take Tigran's body back to Shedu Maad, and there'd be solemn grief for a One Sith fallen, and there'd be subtle suspicion against Terrid and Inexor, because as Sith who'd been indoctrinated as adolescents they'd never fully been trusted by Darth Wyyrlok. But in the end nothing would be proven, and Wyyrlok would have one less warrior when her downfall came.

Somehow Elliah knew when the monsters went away, but she urged Hogrum to stay hidden. She waited for them to come back, waited for some interminable and agonized hour, before she finally told her brother it was okay to come out.

She crawled out from beneath the broken wing. Just the sight of so many dead bodies made her faint and she braced herself against the twisted metal to keep from blacking out. Then she saw Hogrum and pulled herself together. Her younger brother wandered amidst all the corpses, as dazed as her. She hurried over, stepping around

the bodies as best she could, until she could grab him by the shoulders.

After they steadied each other he asked, "What can do now? Where do we go? They said they'll call down the whole fleet."

She looked over his shoulder at the other Miy'til fighter. She thought she'd seen the red-eyed alien dart over to the ship earlier but as she led Hogrum over to it she found only a few superficial scrapes in its hull.

"Is this thing flyable?" asked Hogrum. "Can we get away?"

Elliah had a little bit of training flying ships. She'd never be able to fight her way through that blockade in the little Miy'til but she knew how to get away from this planet and plot a hyperspace route to the final loyalist base on Orelon. She crouched in front of the fighter's cockpit pod and ran her hands over its smooth rounded hull. Even if this thing still worked they'd have to lay low and wait until the attacking fleet left the system or opened a gaping hole in its formation. It was such a little hope, but it was the only one they had.

"Come on," she told her brother. "Let's look this thing over. We need to make sure it will fly."

Hyperdrive travel through the Hapes Cluster was never easy. Its sprawling nebulae and stellar gases provided a natural barrier between the star cluster and its neighbors, fueling its native xenophobia for centuries, and isolated planets like Reboam from more populous systems. Darth Terrid was sure that wherever the last loyalist base was, it was on as good a hiding spot as the Sith's own complex on Shedu Maad.

Terrid had the long multi-jump trip back to reflect. For the whole mission he'd tried to keep the goal of killing Darth Tigran from his mind, both to shield himself from the Zabrak's suspicions and to focus on fighting the loyalists. Now it was all done and while he should have felt relieved, he felt tense instead. For years he'd been working quietly toward the goal of claiming the One Sith for a higher purpose than serving Darth Krayt's far-off dreams. In devoting their lives to a design they'd never see complete the Sith

were limiting themselves like Jedi and refusing the full power offered by the Force. He'd subtly sought out other Sith like Inexor who felt as he did and made them allies.

Now, finally, things were nearing a climax. Hours after they'd left Reboam his fighter's console lit up, informing him that the last necessary piece was falling into place. During the attack on the nobles' hangar the Sith had destroyed all vessels except one of the Miy'til fighters. Before leaving the chamber he'd sensed two last vermin, terrified and cowering but still alive. Likely they were the two youths he'd spotted during the attack, whose bodies he didn't recall seeing in the aftermath, but it didn't matter. Whoever they were, they had only one place to flee.

The signal Terrid was receiving now confirmed what he'd hoped. The tracking device he'd placed on that Miy'til only became active once the ship left the Reboam system. By now those two survivors were on their way to the last loyalist base left. When they got to their destination Terrid would know their exact location.

And once that was done, it would be time to end everything. As he stared at the console Terrid felt the thrill of triumph, but he couldn't stop his hands from shaking.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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For over half a century the most iconic starfighter in the galaxy had been the Incom T-65 X-wing. It was simple in design- a long nose, quad thrust engines, four collapsing S-foils tipped by lance-like cannons- but it was durable and effective, it had been used by thousands of pilots to battle the Empire, the Yuuzhan Vong, and other dangerous threats.

It had been another half-century since those days, and now Alliance pilots flew D-wing bombers and Tri-wing interceptors more often than not, but late-model X-wings were still a common enough sight in the militias of backwater planets or as private ships for mercenaries and couriers. Because of their age almost every one still flying bore heavy modifications of some kind, and it was said that no two identical X-wings existed in the galaxy.

This ubiquity was one of the reasons Marin Fel had been using an X-wing as her transport for the past two years. The extensive modifications she'd done was another. Aside from having reinforced shields and added fuel capacity, upgraded computer systems had made the slot once used for astromech droids obsolete, which had allowed her to refit it into a sleeping space where she could lay down for days-long journeys across the stars. This X-wing

was where she lived now, and cramped as it was, she'd grown fond of it.

When her ship emerged from hyperspace, Marin was wide awake with both hands on her control stick. The planet that lay ahead was colored shades of dusty brown and fertile green, with only a few small blue pools denoting inland seas. It didn't quite feel like home, but Mandalore was still a welcome sight.

It was the capital world of a mercenary band feared across the galaxy, but it still felt like an outpost, more sparsely populated and rustic than many of the Outer Rim worlds Marin frequented nowadays. There was no orbital flight control to ask her where she was going or demand a passcode; she simply set her X-wing on the predetermined course and fell into the planet's atmosphere.

Keldabe was the largest city on Mandalore by far; Marin's destination was about two hundred kilometers directly west, at the foothills of a forested mountain spine that ran north-south across the continent. The settlement was no city; calling it a town would have been too much. Kyrimorut was a hamlet of less than twenty buildings, plus an airfield and hangar where several larger vessels were parked beneath sensor-jamming camo nets.

When Marin's X-wing set down she threw the ladder down the side of her ship and clambered out. The first thing to greet her was, not unexpectedly, a barking akk dog that nestled its head and shoulders against her knees.

"Nice to see you too, Edee." Marin patted the creature's red-scaled back then pulled off her helmet and shook black hair loose. She looked toward the settlement and saw two women walking toward her. One was the about Marin's age and bore a marked family resemblance; the other was older, with streaks of gray in her tied-back hair, but had the same tall thin build as the other two.

To the latter, Marin said simply, "Hi, Mom."

As Tamar Skirata brought her daughter in for a tight hug, her cousin Ninet added, "Good to see you too, *Mar'ika*. What brings you?"

"That's what I wanted to know," said Tamar as she stepped back and looked Marin over. "How long was your flight?"

"From my last location? Two and a half days."

Ninet crossed her arms over her chest and looked the old X-wing over. Marin kept its parts in working order but tiny dents marked its hull and chipped at the red-and-black checkerboard pattern painted on the nose.

"You need to invest in something roomier," Ninet said.

"Sorry, Jedi are stingy about pay raises," said Marin, which got an amused snort from her cousin. "Where's your *buir*?"

"Off-planet, chasing a bounty," Ninet said as they began walking toward the buildings. The ugly red akk dog Edee tagged behind them.

"You're not with him?" asked Marin.

"He's helping Mekar with the job, actually," said Tamar.

"And Mekar doesn't want to split the bounty three ways," Marin rolled her eyes. "Typical."

It was late-afternoon here and the slanting gold sunlight brought a chill breeze. The fresh air and fresh light felt wonderful to Marin; so did stretching her legs. And so, too, did being among family. In many ways she felt more at home here than she did among the Jedi on Ossus. It was a situation she couldn't have imagined when she'd first met Ninet and her father eight years ago, but pretty much everything that had happened since then would have been inconceivable to the girl she'd been before.

After two days of nothing but reheated foods she was glad to have a fresh meal. She sat down with a dozen other members of the Skirata clan, ranging in age from seventy years old to seven, and enjoyed a healthy mix of meats, herbs, and alcohol. These people would enjoy themselves brazenly, like Jedi or Imperials never could, but for the most part Marin sat to the side, ate and drank, and listened to the conversation. It had taken her a long time to learn the exact convoluted ways in which she was related to these people and in some cases there was no common ancestor at all, but as Mandalorians were wont to say, family was more than blood. This family had been wary of accepting a Jedi among them in the beginning, but after Marin's first fateful mission with her mother,

Ninet, and Dorn they'd trusted her as a blooded member of their clan, and that trust was absolute.

During the meal she sat on the opposite end of the circle from her mother, more by chance than design. She was by Ninet instead and listened to her cousin recounting the latest mission she'd gone on with her father. It was typical Mando stuff: their group had been hired by one mildly successful criminal to steal another mildly successful criminal's cargo ship, only this cargo ship had contained a surprise set of old Tendrando Arms YVH war droids for security.

None of it was the kind of mission the Jedi would approve of. These Mandalorians were enthusiastically amoral in many ways; their motivations never reached the lofty abstractions of Light and Dark that Jedi concerned themselves with and focused on little else but credits and family ties. Marin's mother had been raised to have those base values; it was one of the reasons she'd never made it as a Jedi Knight. Marin had, but she didn't find these people morally alien like most Jedi did. They'd accepted her too readily for her to reject them.

After it was all eaten Marin went out of the hut to watch the sun die down. This mountainside encampment, east-facing as it was, had a truly excellent view of sunrise but fell into shadow hours before the day's proper end. The cloudless sky was turning from red-gold to violet to black, smoothly but quickly, and Marin set herself on a bench that looked down the forested slope and waited for stars to appear.

As the first lights started to twinkle up above, Tamar sat down on the bench beside her daughter and said, "Not that we don't appreciate you coming here, but I know you didn't stop by to say hello."

"No," Marin admitted. "Dad sent me actually."

"Your *father*?" Tamar sounded incredulous.

"Well, kind of. He wants me to do some information-gathering and I figured this was one good place to look."

Marin could have easily called from her X-wing from the far corner of the galaxy but she'd chosen to take the two-day trip here. Tamar knew that, understood that, and let her pleasure register



with a tiny ripple in their Force-bond. Then she said, "What kind of information?"

"Dad's on Arquilla now. He's got Nat with him. They're looking into the violence that's been kicking in between the Tynnan and Duros populations."

"I've heard about that. The Alliance asked him to do it?"

"Chance Calrissian, actually."

"Those two are still dragging each other into *osik*, then..." Tamar shook her head, but she had a wry smile. "But what do you expect to get from us?"

They both understood that as much as Marin liked being here, she wouldn't just use the job as an excuse to come. "Dad says Tynnan groups have gotten their hands on military-grade weapons. It's gotten that bad. Somebody's supplying them and fanning this fire. You may not know yourself, but you've got to know people who know."

"And sign of Mando involvement?"

"None. Have you heard about any?"

"No. But you're right. People on this planet tend to have friends in the gun-running industry."

"Since Dorn and Mekk are out, I was thinking Jovar might know."

"You can talk to him yourself."

"Right."

"Or I can introduce you to your *ba'vodu* and *then* you can ask him."

"Okay." She'd been expecting about that.

Tamar sighed in frustration with her daughter's weakness of nerve. She was within her rights; Marin's current hesitation wasn't fitting of a Jedi or a Mando. Tamar pushed herself off the bench and started toward the settlement. Marin followed without a word.

Jovar Skirata was technically Tamar's uncle, not Marin's. In his seventies, he was the oldest person in the settlement tonight, and though he was still as fit as a man his age could hope for he moved slowly; his hair had gone white, small battle-marks dotted his face and his knuckles were encrusted with scars.

Jovar was the child of Tamar's grandfather Venku, who himself had been born to an Old Republic Jedi and a clone soldier. Those Force-user genes were hit or miss but Jovar had them. Venku Skirata had purposely repressed his ability to use the Force for most of his life, until a late encounter with Marin's grandmother Jaina had changed his mind and motivated him to impart some wisdom to young Tamar. For Jovar there'd been no conversion; all his life he'd followed Venku's initial path and resisted using the Force. He'd been the one Skirata who'd never let go of his reluctance to accept a Jedi into the clan.

He was also the one with the most friends and connections, the one who'd be able to tell her about arms shipments to Arquilla. Tamar and Marin found him in his round, simple hut. He was doing what Marin usually saw him do, caring for his extensive collection of antique bladed weapons from cultures she hadn't even heard of.

"Marin's got a question for you, *ba'vodu*," Tamar said as she and her daughter filled the hut's entry portal.

Jovar glanced up from his workbench for a second, then put his eyes back on his knives. "Ask away."

Tamar gave her daughter a nudge in the Force and the younger woman said, "I came here to get information on arms shipments going into Arquilla. Do you think you can ask around about that for me?"

Jovar ran a calloused finger-tip along the straight edge of a dagger. "Do you think Mandos are involved?"

"There's no indication, but someone is giving them Arakyd portable missile launchers and more."

"Hmm. *Jeti* business, is it?"

"You know it is," Marin said, then added, "I just want to stop the fighting," even though it wasn't much of a Mando sentiment.

Jovar held his knife up to admire the sheen of lamplight on smooth metal. "What more?"

Marin blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Arakyd missiles launchers and more.' What more?"

"I'm not sure at the moment. Everything's kind of a mess down there."

"I bet it is." He placed the dagger on the table. "Give me some time. I'll make some calls for you."

It was the most unenthusiastic offer of help Marin had ever heard, but she wasn't about to turn him down. "Thank you so much."

Jovar nodded, picked up another knife, and started looking it over. Tamar gave her daughter another wordless nudge in the Force. It was their signal to walk away.

As they went out into the night a cool breeze rushed down the mountain, chilling them. Marin hugged herself and said, "I shouldn't have expected anything more, should I?"

"Probably not. But he'll do what you asked."

"Because I'm *aliit*," Marin said, naming the *Mando'a* term for inviolable clan.

"That's right," Tamar said, and after a few seconds of silence added, "You should be glad he *can* go around asking these questions. It wasn't so long ago nobody would answer them."

Marin knew what she meant; it started before she was even born. Her mother's actions during the Senex-Juvex crisis twenty-five years ago had made her an enemy of the *Mand'ador*, Gevern Auchs. Auchs had avoided an overt fight with the rest of her clan but the Skiratas had laid low for almost twenty years, still a part of the Mandalorians' league of mercenaries but always on the outside circle.

Everything had changed eight years ago; for Marin, the Skiratas, and it seemed everyone else. Back then she had been a fourteen-year-old Jedi apprentice, desperate and terrified and trying to save her mother who'd finally roused Auchs' lethal ire. Marin hadn't *intended* to kill Gevern Auchs but she had, with a clean lightsaber-slice through the neck. To this day only Tamar, Ninet, and Dorn knew who'd killed the *Mand'ador* and sparked a messy two-year succession war that had ended with Clan Auchs on the outside circle. The *Mand'ador* now was a man named Ekram Shal; by all accounts he could be a nasty figure to his enemies but he

wasn't taking contracts with the Sith like Auch's had and he wasn't persecuting the Skiratas. When Jovar reached out to his old friends from other clans he'd find people happy to talk. He had Marin to thank for that, though she had never once been tempted to bring that up. Eight years later she tried to think about her first kill as little as possible.

Mother and daughter walked quietly through the assembled huts until they reached Tamar's. She asked, "How long do you think you'll stay?"

"Not long. It depends what Jovar has, obviously."

"We're all glad you came."

"I figured that." Marin looked up at the star-filled sky. "Do you still take a lot of jobs nowadays?"

Tamar tilted her head. "Do you mean 'are you getting so old and broke-down you're staying at home all the time'?"

"I was just asking."

Tamar looked up at the skies too. "You're father's as old as me. Is he staying at home?"

"You know he isn't."

"Well there you are."

"Just... stay safe, Mom."

Tamar looked down at her daughter. Darkness in her eyes but Marin could feel sentiment through the Force. Marin might have been a full Jedi Knight, but to Tamar she'd always her child.

"*Ret', Mar'ika*," Tamar said softly, then slipped inside her hut. Marin watched her draw the door shut tight, then started slowly for the room prepared for her.

Nat was looking pensive and Arlen couldn't blame him. His mother had arrived on Arquilla the night before but had passed only a short comm message to Arlen and her son before meeting up with the Alliance negotiation team and the local counterparts at a facility on the outskirts of the port city that hadn't been touched by the recent violence.

Chance Calrissian was still on-planet but locked in furious discussions with his lawyers about how much money they could

wrangle from their insurance providers over the destroyed refinery, which left Arlen and Nat on their own. Though the Alliance was explicit about Jade being the only Jedi allowed on the negotiating team, master and apprentice had decided between them that it would do nobody any harm if two additional Jedi stayed in the area and kept on the lookout.

Because the facility was located up in the hills, away from the city and under thorough guard from Galactic Alliance security, trying to get close was pointless. Arlen had instead decided that he and Nat should patrol the town itself and use their heightened Force-sense to search for anything suspicious.

Under normal circumstances Arquilla's port had a healthy mix of offworlder traders to mix in with the lanky grey-skinned Duros and squat furry Tynnans. The recent civil unrest had sent most of the offworlders packing, which meant two humans drew stares as they walked around the city, even though they both tried to hide their pale faces beneath the hoods of long loose robes.

Arquilla's cities had been thrown up hastily after the Yuuzhan Vong War. The layout of this one was a plain grid and the buildings were mostly angular and utilitarian. As they moved through the streets Arlen and Nat could see small signs of unrest even on the main thoroughfares: smashed-open windows, torn-down banners, even a few buildings with dozens of blaster marks pocking their facades. The people on the street moved quickly, sparing only short suspicious glances at the robed humans. Nobody stopped to talk; everyone wanted to finish business and get inside. As an apprentice Nat couldn't pick up much in the Force from these passing strangers but to Arlen all of them, Duros and Tynnan alike, emanated an interesting cocktail of paranoid tension, dread, and resignation. All of them expected things to get worse and were mentally bracing themselves for the next spark to start a fire. If any of these beings had heard about the Alliance negotiating team that was meeting just a few kilometers away, none of them seemed encouraged.

Arlen could sense something else against all the anxieties of the locals. Nat was soaking in everything he could, with the Force and

his five senses, and burning them into his brain. Arlen had taken his apprentice to some relatively rough worlds on the Outer Rim but never to a place that had seen fresh, large-scale violence. The boy was far from his usual element and knew it, but instead of shirking from the danger he tried to anticipate and be ready.

It was a reaction that made Arlen proud, and he decided that since Nat seemed willing, he'd lead the boy away from the center of the city, which had gotten through the recent violence with relatively superficial damage, and take him to some of the worse areas. A ten minute walk from the main boulevard was enough to show them entire city blocks that had been burned to the ground. Cleanup crews had moved debris off the streets but charred-out shells of buildings housed layers of wreckage. Arlen didn't know if the government had sifted through all the ruins for bodies yet; even if they had, there were probably some still buried deep.

They stopped outside the remnants of what had probably been an apartment block. A fire-scarred wall jutted ten stories up but everything around it had collapsed. It felt different than being in front of Chance's refinery; Arlen could feel how it unsettled Nat. Wind carried the taste of days-old ash and the Force brought light echoes of all the being that had called this place home.

"This isn't right," the boy said, hugging himself in the warm sunlight.

"Your mother's helping put a stop to this right now," said Arlen.

"Is she? The Alliance sent a negotiating team, but... Will that be enough?"

Arlen had no idea. He frankly doubted it; panic and desperation fed themselves and there was already plenty of that on Arquilla.

"There should be more Jedi here," Nat said.

"Doing what?"

"Ending this. We need to make these people stop fighting."

"With the Force?"

"Isn't that what Jedi do?"

Arlen sighed. "Trying to control the desires and actions of millions of people isn't a Jedi thing, Nat. It's a little too close to Sith for my liking."

"How is wanting to help people a Dark Side thing?" Nat's face screwed up, honestly confused.

Arlen knew too well what good intentions could get a Jedi. His mother had told him everything about the uncle he'd never met, the one who'd been so determined to stop a war that he sold his soul to a Sith. Arlen had heard that lesson early and it had always stuck with him. His mother had once bluntly suggested that it had given Arlen an attitude that veered away from both authority and responsibility.

Arlen didn't want to explain that to his apprentice now, so he said, "You can't trust good intentions alone. Come on, let's get back to the main drag."

As they walked away from the shambles Nat wouldn't let it go. "There's nothing *wrong* with good intentions. And you can't say power always corrupts. It didn't corrupt Allana."

"If you've ever talk to Allana about being Chief of State she'll tell you she less ruled over the Alliance and more juggled priorities from a couple thousand senators. Which is fine, because that's how democracy's supposed to work."

Nat hesitated for a second before going there. "It didn't corrupt your brother, either."

"Davek doesn't have the Force at all. No Dark Side temptation for him."

"But his wife, and all the other Imperial Knights, *they* haven't been corrupted. Have they?"

This was really not a conversation Arlen wanted to have right now. For eight years he'd watched from afar as his sister-in-law and nephews had become famous galaxy-wide as faces of the new Empire and the new Order of Imperial Knights. Marasiah had promised him that no matter what she'd keep those Knights on the Light side of the Force, and he knew she'd never willingly let her own sons dabble in the dark, but he also knew how cruel the fight for the Empire's soul had been. Whatever kind of Knights

responsibility was forging Vitor and Roan into, it was very different from what Nat and Kol would become.

"They don't have an easy path," he told Nat.

"Mine isn't either," the boy said defensively.

"I know. But count yourself lucky you grew up away from all that, in peacetime."

"Is this peacetime?" Nat looked back at the black wall of the apartment building.

"No, and be thankful this is only happening on one planet instead of the whole damn Alliance."

Nat let that one sink in. As they neared the main boulevard again and the crowd started getting dense he shouldered close to Arlen and asked in a low voice, "Do you think the Sith are behind this?"

It was a question worth asking. Most of the major flash points in Arlen's lifetime- the Hapan secession, the Senex-Juvex Rising, the civil war in the Empire- had been helped along by hidden Sith machinations.

"I don't know," Arlen admitted, "But just because something goes bad doesn't mean there's Sith behind it. All the things you're feeling in town now- the desperation, paranoia, anger, all of it- come naturally to most sentients. That's why the Dark Side is so seductive in the first place."

It wasn't an answer, but Nat nodded anyway.

As they walked the center of the town Arlen moved them toward the transportation center. Things got especially dense here and it was more difficult to track the thoughts and emotions of all the Duros and Tynnans weaving around, but Arlen did his best to concentrate.

When he sensed the intent toward violence he latched onto it and grabbed Nat by the sleeve. He let his feet draw him closer to the source of that strong, angry emotion, deeper into the crowd and deeper into the complex of hangars and landing pads that stored many of the city's hoverbuses as well as private airspeeders.

"Arlen, what is it?" Nat said. "What do you sense?"



Arlen tugged his apprentice into an unused hallway and bent close to whisper, "Do you feel it close by?"

"Feel what? There's too many people around here."

It was all too much for the apprentice. Arlen slipped one hand into the folds of his robe to confirm the lightsaber still clipped at his waist. He reached out with the Force again and felt it, not far away at all. He hurried deeper down the empty hall and Nat followed, confused but obedient.

When they reached the hallway's end Arlen glanced back to make sure they were still alone, then thumbed his weapon to life. It hummed softly in his hand as he cleaved through the metal wall-panel in front of them. He cut carefully so as not to damage any wiring that might be beneath, but when he pulled the cut-free panel away with the Force he saw only metal framing and the backside of another wall-panel.

"Who *is* it?" Nat asked.

Arlen tapped a finger to his lips and cut a small hole into the other section of the wall with the tip of his lightsaber. He used the Force to remove that small piece and bent close to look through the hole in the wall.

It was a sealed-off hangar with some kind of airspeeder inside. He couldn't name the model but it looked new, probably Incom and decidedly military, with laser cannons attached to the end of each wing and what looked like concussion missiles mounted on external hardpoints hanging beneath. The cockpit looked like it had room for two and, sure enough two short, furry Tynnans stepped into range.

They started speaking to each other in their fast, chirping language. Arlen had no idea what they were saying but he reached out with the Force to feel their intentions more fully than before. They meant violence, all right, and soon. If they were prepping this airspeeder for launch they meant to do harm somewhere not far away; perhaps in the city, perhaps at a certain meeting place in the hills outside.

Arlen couldn't get that much from them in the Force, but what he got he didn't like.

"Someone's up to no good," Arlen told his apprentice.

"And you just *found* them? What are the odds?"

"One nice thing about being a Jedi is that you can chalk up dumb luck to the Will of the Force and sometimes mean it."

As he said it the Tynnans started scampering into their ship. Arlen bit back a swear and thumbed on his lightsaber again. Nat jumped back in surprise as the blue blade shot out and began burning through the metal wall-plate. As Arlen cut a circle big enough to leap through, he heard the airspeeder's repulsors whine to life.

"They're getting away!" shouted Nat.

"Get back!" Arlen told the boy, and when the circle was complete he used the Force to push the cut-open wall panel into the hangar. He ducked through the hole just in time to see the airspeeder rise up and the broad hangar walls start to groan open.

Arlen lifted his lightsaber to hurl it at the target; then the ship pivoted hard and fast so its wingtip canons pointed right at the hole he'd come through. Nat, despite the warning, had crawled halfway through the opening and froze when he saw the barrel-mouths ahead.

Arlen felt their intention right before they fired. He jumped in front of Nat, dug his heels into the floor, and raised his lightsaber. At this range the impact force of the single laser blast was enough to punch him into the wall, but he caught the plasma bolt on his blade. It bounced away, right into the duracrete floor, and cut a black smoking scorch-line all the way to the opposite wall.

As Arlen tried to push back from the wall and ignore the pain, the airspeeder kicked itself forward and soared out through the hangar mouth. Nat was right beside him, squeezing his arm with both hands.

"Master, are you alright?" the boy said, wide-eyed and breathless. It was the closest he'd yet come to dying.

"I'm okay," Arlen lied; odds were good he'd cracked ribs or shoulder-blades and was fortunate not to have damaged his spine.

"What do we do? What were they-"

"We need to alert local security and warn your mother."

"How?"

"Another nice thing about being a Jedi is that you can usually find somebody willing to lend you their speeder in an emergency."

"With or without Force suggestion?"

"Only one way to find out. Come on, Nat, no time to waste."

The selling point in Jade's participation in these negotiations had been her experience in the Unity and Justice trials on Fengrine, and this was bringing back familiar memories. She found herself seated at the same table as Senator Toreena and her aides, facing two more groups seated at separate tables representing community leaders among the Duros and Tynnans. They'd convened in a private complex in the mountains outside the city and were meeting in a room with broad transparisteel windows overlooking green forests. The Alliance people were trying to arbitrate and force a compromise between the parties, and the moment Jade stepped into the room she could feel tides of recrimination and anger washing back and forth between the Duros and Tynnan gatherings. That alone had brought back memories from Fengrine, where grudges centuries-old and fresh, personal wounds had pitted aggrieved parties against each other.

The biggest different between then and now was that Jade was here to observe only, not arbitrate. Senator Toreena had made that very clear as soon as she'd arrived. Ithorians had a reputation as a gentle people but the chair of the senate's Federation Committee had skipped the niceties and told Jade that she disagreed with the Triumvirate's decision to send a Jedi arbitrator and expected her to watch the proceedings in silence and only offer advice between sessions.

Jade was, therefore, stuck at the end of the table with little to do besides sink into the Force and feel the emotions of those around her. The Duros complained that their communities were besieged and blamed the Tynnans for the violence. The Tynnan representatives- quite honestly, Jade felt- rejected blame and insisted that if any of their race *had* been launching military-style attacks it was being done by rogue elements. Both groups appealed

to the Alliance team and insisted that their species were not warriors by practice but businessbeings, which was true as it went. Duros were renowned galaxy-wide as spacers, engineers, and manufacturers; Tynnans were famously adept at trade and finance. The situation on Arquilla, Jade thought, was proof of where high emotions and extreme situations could drive otherwise rational beings, but per Senator Toreena's request she held back from making several statements that, she felt, could have soothed nerves.

The senator, Jade had to admit, was doing a decent job of that herself. The Ithorian's blunt private nature was carefully shielded behind a gentle diplomatic front, and though Jade could feel her frustration in the Force as the Duros and Tynnans bickered on and on, she let none of it leak into her measured stereophonic speech.

"For seventy years your peoples have made Arquilla your home," she told them during one lull in the argument. "Neither of you can claim this place as your own. You settled here together, at the same time, after both your homeworlds were ruined by the Yuuzhan Vong. You both worked together because you were united as exiles. Now the toll of that same exile drives you against each other.

"Gentlebeings, I know the pain you feel. The Yuuzhan Vong seeded poison into the atmosphere of my world and burned the Mother Forest. Trillions across the galaxy must live with the pain of an exile that has lasted generations, and trillions more will live with it in generations to come. But gentlebeings, we cannot let that pain blind us to all we have in common."

It was, Jade admitted to herself, a pretty good little speech.

When a new mind touched hers it came without warning but it was instantly familiar and instantly understood. Empathic bonds had never been Nat's strength but with his mother he'd usually been able to form a connection if he was close by. Arlen had said they'd be scoping out the town, almost ten kilometers away, and her link with Nat normally didn't care over such long distances.

From the panic she felt, he was a lot closer than that and coming closer still. As the lead Duros delegate started speaking Jade closed her eyes and tried to hear what her son was telling her. He

was with Arlen, and they were coming fast, but it felt like someone *else* was coming fast and they'd get there before the Jedi.

There was no time to doubt or hesitate. Jade popped to her feet and said, "I'm sorry, but we need to get to a secure area right away."

The Duros delegate, stunned by the interruption, was speechless, but the lead Tynnan twitched his whiskers and asked, "Excuse me, but who *are* you?"

Jade ignored him and looked at Toreena. "Call your security team. They're coming by air."

"Who is coming by air?" the Ithorian asked from both mouths.

"Clear the room!" Jade added Force suggestion to her shout. The other Duros jerked from their seats first and that started a rush.

Toreena, however, went straight to Jade and swung her hammerhead so close it almost knocked the Jedi in the face. "This is outrageous! You have no authority to break these proceedings!"

Jade could feel Arlen calling to her in the Force as well. She looked away from the senator and out the windows, where a dark shape was swinging in from the right side. It flew low over the treetops and suddenly turned. Its small shape grew larger fast as it began its attack run.

"Get out now!" Jade shouted and gave Toreena a Force-push toward the door. She vaulted over the table and rushed toward the window as the last members of the Tynnan party grabbed their datapads and rushed for the exit.

Jade didn't wait for the approaching speeder to blast through the chamber's thin glass windows. She did it herself. One gust of Force energy shattered them and pushed the sharp shards outward so they fell into the forest below. She drew out her lightsaber and extended its violet blade just as the first chain of lasers lanced straight toward the broad windowframe.

These were no small arms shots, easily batted aside. Jade gathered the Force inside her. The onward rush of the lasers, a mere second in real time, seemed to slow and stretch out. She knew where the two shots would come and lifted her saber, high and diagonal, to catch them. She raised an invisible hand behind her

that pushed her forward to counter the inertia of the heavy plasma bolts.

The lasers were on her, and then they ricocheted back out into the sky. Her heels dug into the room's soft carpet but hadn't budged a millimeter. Two more shots came two seconds later; she kept the invisible strength behind her and knocked those shots away.

The speeder was too close for a third shot. It veered her to the right and rushed overhead and out of view, but she was sure it was already beginning a tight circle for another attack run.

Then another craft dipped into view. It flew low over the treetops, right toward her. It was smaller than the attacking ship, a mere speeder bike, and as it drew close Jade could see its riders' long cloaks flapping like banners in the wind. Even before she saw that, she'd felt them in the Force and knew Arlen and her son had arrived.

That Incom speeder the attackers were flying looked hefty but it was fast and could turn on a pinhead. Arlen counted himself fortunate, or Force-blessed, that he'd been able to commandeer a very nice Mobquet swoop bike to give chase. He hadn't actually flown a swoop in many years but it came back to him, mostly, on the straightaway chase here. Now that they'd arrived at the complex in the hills he had to wrestle with the controls and outmaneuver the airspeeder, which was proving tricky.

When it had fired off the first round of shots Arlen's heart had sunk, but he should have had more faith than that. A violet saber came to life and batted all four shots back.

The airspeeder broke right was coming came around for another attack run. Arlen gunned the swoop forward. By his estimate they'd be able to take the airspeeder on its left flank just as it got within firing range for a second attack. He had a feeling this time it would use its wing-mounted missiles and even Jade couldn't do much against those.

Arlen could get there in time. Unfortunately, they hadn't been lucky enough to grab a swoop with working armaments. Arlen had

a single blaster pistol on his belt but small arms wouldn't do any good against that speeder. He'd have to try something else.

He shifted against the apprentice clinging to his back and shouted over the wind. "Nat! Get ready to take the controls!"

"I don't know how to fly a swoop!"

"Learn fast! Get ready to pull it hard right!" He elbowed Nat's arms off his side and pushed himself halfway out of the swoop's saddle while still gunning forward. The airspeeder was wheeling around fast. When its port wing flashed close, Arlen jerked the bike's control stick up and to the side, then jumped.

He didn't spare a look or thought at Nat wrestling with the controls. He couldn't afford to. He was in the air for less than a second before he hit the top of the airspeeder's wing hard enough to knock it off balance and mess up its tight turn. The smooth surface immediately began slipping beneath him but he used the Force to slow his slide and called his lightsaber to right hand. As he turned it on his free hand grabbed hold of the wing's forward edge and he dropped down, stomach against the wing's flat surface. Then he ran the lightsaber through hard metal, burning through the surface, cutting the lines that fed power and plasma to the wingtip laser cannons.

The speeder bucked beneath him like it was trying to throw him off, but one glance to his other side revealed black smoke trailing from the flickering engines. Something he'd cut must have triggered a power failure in the propulsion system. The craft veered away from the conference center and dropped, smoking, toward the forest.

In seconds in would crash and in second he'd be dead. He could try jumping right before it hit the treeline, then use the Force to cushion his fall and hope he didn't impale himself on a tree-branch. It was a long shot. It was his best hope. There had to be a better way to die than this.

And then, without warning, the airspeeder stopped falling. The sudden arrest jerked Arlen so hard he nearly lost his grip on the wing's edge. He looked back the engine, still smoking. The ship

seemed dead but it was being lowered, with surprising smoothness, toward a small clearing in the forest below.

Still clinging hard to the ship's exterior, Arlen allowed himself a sigh of relief. Jade Skywalker didn't make a show of it, but she possessed more raw power than any Jedi in the Order.

When she set down the speeder it didn't have any landing struts extended, which made for a rough impact on uneven terrain. Arlen was prepared for that, just as he was prepared to release his grip and jump upright to land Force-assisted but stable on the slanting wingtop. The cockpit popped open and, just as he'd expected, the two Tynnans inside came out blasters-blazing. They were shocked and disoriented, not just from the crash but from the surprise failure of their attack. Arlen cleaved the barrels off both their weapons in the first five seconds. From there it was easy to subdue them.

After that, once everything was done, Arlen took a deep breath, sat down on the airspeeder's jutting wing, and waited for help to come.

Jade arrived with an Alliance security team that was quick to take the Tynnan attackers into custody. Senator Toreena and the local negotiating teams were still in the conference complex, huddled safe in an armored basement. The Ithorian had offered grudging gratitude to Jade for her help, then said she'd contact the Triumvirate right away and ask what more Jedi were doing on Arquilla when only one had been requested.

Jade was pretty sure it would all work out legally, and even if it didn't go totally smooth she found she couldn't care. Throwing yourself from one moving speeder to another moving speeder, then cutting it open and forcing it to crash-land, was the kind of stunt you'd expect from a brash young Jedi Knight, not a Master who'd pushed past fifty. Arlen didn't look seriously injured but he was clearly winded, and even after the Alliance people took the Tynnans away he stayed where he was, seating on the edge of the crashed speeder's wing with legs dangling beneath. Jade stood on the ground looking up at him and said, "That was a big risk."



"It worked, didn't it? Thank you, by the way."

"Not a problem. I-" Jade stopped and turned around. She felt Nat before she heard him breaking through the undergrowth or saw him press into the clearing. Her son looked winded too, and his unruly shoulder-length blond hair was stuck with twigs and pine needles.

"Had a hard time setting the bike down?" Arlen asked.

"I landed eventually," Nat said, and pulled one large twig from his tangles.

He stopped a half-meter from his mother; their eyes met and he struggled for something to say. Jade closed the gap and wrapped his broad shoulders in a hug. At fifteen he was already taller than her; he'd probably be as high as Jodram once he stopped growing. The thought tugged her heart.

"We, uh, borrowed a swoop bike," her son said as he started picking needles from his tunic. "We should probably give it back."

Jade looked at Arlen. "What kind of borrow are we talking about?"

"I asked nicely and used a little Force suggestion. Which, given the circumstances, was the best I could do. We stumbled on those guys right when they were taking off and had only a split-second to make the choice, so we gave chase." Arlen said. "I think I did something like that with you way back when."

"That sounds possible." Jade looked over her son again. "Does your uncle always get you into this much trouble?"

"Not always," Nat said, then added with a sly smile, "Just sometimes."

"I'm not that bad," Arlen said, and finally dropped off the wing. He used the Force to soften his fall as he landed boots-to-dirt right next to Jade. "I hope our hosts are grateful."

"You mean the Alliance? As grateful as she'll get."

"I was thinking about the locals. You get any hint the Tynnan delegates knew two of their fellows were going to try and blow it up?"

"None."

"Which means we're looking at multiple factions *within* the two main ones and generally a big mess that's probably being fueled by outside 'help.'"

"Do you know that for sure?"

"Not yet," Arlen shook his head. "But Marin's on the case. If there's someone shipping weapons to Arquilla, she'll find it."

Sunrise from Kyrimorut was indeed as gorgeous as Marin remembered. She sat herself down on the same bench as last night and watched golden light crest the distant flat horizon-line and spill across the plain. She watched the sky, streaked by thin clouds, turn from black to red to pale pretty blue over the course of an hour.

About halfway through the watch she was joined by her great-uncle Jovar. "I got what I could," the old Mando said. Marin was surprised he'd worked so fast.

"Like what?" she asked.

"Just rumors. A ship full of Arakyd weapons got hijacked three weeks ago by unknown pirates."

"Where was this?"

"Off the Hydian, near Celanon. There's been a few other hits on arms manufacturers' shipments too. Nobody knows if it's coordinated, but rumors say the Hutts are behind it."

"There are a lot of Hutt crime families out there. Do you know which one?"

"Sorry, but no."

It wasn't much, but it provided just enough clarification that it might be useful. If one of the Hutt cartels was shipping weapons to Arquilla then it meant their competitors were *not*, and those competitors might be amenable to helping a Jedi shut down their rival's operation. Marin already had one specific competitor in mind.

"Well," she said, "I think this points me in a direction."

"Glad to help." Jovar exhaled and pushed himself off the bench.

Marin turned on the bench and said to his back, "Thank you. I really appreciate this."

The old Mandalorian stopped for a moment, and Marin picked up his faint hesitation in the Force. Then, instead of turning back, he continued on. There might be a day where he and Marin would talk one-on-one about the Force and why he so stubbornly turned away from it, but it would not be this day.

She looked back to the sunrise. It was still lovely but a bit of the glamor was gone. She had work to do, and as much as she appreciated her short breaks on Kyrimorut with her mother she had her duties. Marin might not have been a typical Jedi but she was still firmly a Jedi, and then meant her job was to keep the peace, even if it meant that for her, this morning's peace was all too short-lived.

## CHAPTER SIX

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Roan Fel knew he was lucky. He had access to the best doctors in the Empire, not to mention the few Imperial Knights skilled as healers, and less than a week after receiving a concussion, cracked cheekbone, and two broken ribs on Ansion he was physically as good as new.

He tried to keep telling himself that as he put himself to the test. Treis Sinde was two years older than Roan but had been ordained an Imperial Knight at the same time. The other young man had never acted superior, nor did he act obsequious and deferential to the Emperor's younger son like most people, even other Imperial Knights, did. He was glad for that, and grateful to have someone he could spar with who he knew wouldn't hold back.

He knew Treis' fighting style and Treis knew his, and in normal fights they were pretty evenly matched. They sparred in a private chamber in the Bastion Academy's lower levels and this time Treis kept getting the better of him. He moved faster and hit harder, and though Roan was familiar with his attacks and knew how to block them he found he was always just a little too slow.

Once they were both panting and damp with sweat Treis finally stepped back, shut off his lightsaber, and said, "You're trying too hard."

"Not hard enough, apparently. The doctors and healers say I'm back in perfect condition. I just don't feel it."

Treis shook his head. "Nobody blames you for being rattled by what happened."

Roan's first instinct was to deny he was rattled at all, but Treis knew him better than that. He shut his saber down and said, "This isn't the first time I've been hurt, or been close to dying."

"It was the first time you were captured and had to be rescued."

The memory of his mother and brother, his saviors, bent over him with love and concern on their faces should have been a warm one, but instead it made him flush with shame.

Treis sensed it and said, "The important thing is not to drag it all with you the next time we go into battle. Take your time and make sure you've got it out of your system before we face the enemy again."

Treis spoke with hard wisdom there. His father had been killed by the Sith at the very start of this war. He'd been just eleven at the time and the following years had been very difficult for him. His training as an apprentice Knight had been fraught with frustration and anger and a simmering desire to avenge his father against the Sith who, surprisingly, had not show themselves since Veers' first attack on the Jedi academy all those years ago. Treis' road to full knighthood had been longer and more difficult than for most but he'd seemed to have passed through all the dark side's temptations and reached a place of quiet, sanguine maturity that belied his years.

That was how it seemed, and Roan hoped it was the case, but he still wondered how Treis would react if the Sith ever made themselves known again. They were out there somewhere, and the Imperial Knights' efforts to root them out had revealed only that they didn't seem to be working with Veers any more.

"So," Treis said to break the pensive pause, "Any idea where we'll be going next?"

"Another rat's nest, I'm sure, but I can't say where. Vitor's meeting with the intelligence director now."

"I'm sure there's plenty more nests out there, but we don't have to find each one personally."

"We won't, but when we find the *big* nest, you know my father will want every Knight he can get."

Treis nodded. Veers and Grave were still out there and so was their battered but lethal super star destroyer *Nemesis*. For years people had talked about finding the Restorationists' last big hiding place but despite extensive searches it had eluded capture. One day, though, they'd find the big nest and exterminate the rats inside. Everyone on both sides was just waiting for that day to come.

The door to their sparring chamber slid open. Roan hadn't told anyone they'd be here but he wasn't surprised to see his cousin step into the chamber. At sixteen Mohrgan Valtor was a year and a half younger than Roan and treated him with a respect for both his age and title. That sort of behavior would have rankled coming from Treis but from Mohrgan, Roan found it rather comforting.

"I thought I'd find you two here." A knowing smile formed on Mohrgan's dark face. He wasn't the best fighter among the apprentice Knights but he had great empathic skills, especially where his cousins were concerned.

"I'm just trying to get back to peak form." Roan tried a confident grin.

"He's making progress," Treis supported, "But I think I'm worn out for today."

"I'd be willing to give it a try," said Mohrgan. They all knew he wouldn't have joined them if he wasn't itching to participate.

"Then by all means, join the fun," Treis said as he stepped off the practice mat. "Assuming our prince is ready, of course?"

Mohrgan he could beat in a normal sparring match and he'd definitely make an easier opponent than Treis. The apprentice could be just what he needed for a confidence-boost today. "Why wouldn't I be?" Roan asked. "Let's get started."

Vitor knew that his sitting down with the director of Imperial Intelligence and the Supreme Commander of Navy this afternoon was not a privilege afforded to other Imperial Knights, especially

ones as young as he. Emperor Fel showed no qualms about delegating authority to his wife and sons, and Vitor had been designated to attend this meeting while Davek was off at Yaga Minor.

If that kind of imposition rankled the two older beings, they'd long ago learned to hide it. Supreme Commander Hallis was a white-haired and crease-faced man who handled the administrative aspects of the Empire's military machine and had commanded the Imperial First Fleet for twenty years before that. Intelligence Director Vennefara was a different case entirely; after the former intel chief Sojuz had joined Veers' rebels, Emperor Fel had moved his sole alien deputy into the role as part of his policy of integrating and promoting non-humans. The secretive and analytical Elomin, a gaunt pale-skinned humanoid with horns like a crown on his bald head, matched Vitor's mental image of a spymaster perfectly.

"It's unfortunate that we were unable to recover anything useful from the computers at the Ansion base," Vennefara said after summarizing the results of the raid Vitor had led. "But it's to be expected. The Restorationists have learned how to fight like true underdogs. Each cell is isolated from the ones around it."

"We've still dealt them a blow," said Hallis. "The amount of war material we confiscated or destroyed will set them back severely."

"None of it brings us any closer to finding the big nest," Vitor said, using the colloquial that had come to signify for everyone the place where Veers and his *Nemesis* were hiding.

"This is unfortunately true," the old admiral nodded, "But if we keep this pattern of action we can consistently chip away at their support base. We've already removed their power to do more than guerilla raids. And even then, they've not mounted a significant attack on a supply convoy or military base in the past two months."

"That in itself is what worries me," said Vennefara. "It signifies they may be ready to change tactics."

"Change to what?" asked Vitor.

"Our civilian populace has gotten... comfortable. Walk down the streets of Ravelin and ask yourself if it looks like a city at

wartime. It does not. *We* are still ruthlessly pursuing the enemy, but our citizens think the war is already won."

"And you think Veers will aim for them next?"

"It's very likely." The Elomin looked to Hallis. "Right now our fleets are clustered around military targets to protect them. I recommend spreading them out wider to better protect civilian targets."

Hallis said, "We went through this issue against the raiders eight years ago. We have nearly a thousand inhabited systems in the Empire and barely enough capital ships to defend them."

"The raiders were attacking with a huge, savage fleet," Vitor reminded grimly. "One such force had killed his grandfather. "The Restorationists don't have that kind of power."

"They still have *Nemesis*, and by our count a dozen smaller star destroyers," Vennefara said. "If Veers wants to launch one big assault against a lightly-defended civilian world he can do it."

Hallis sighed. "Yet you tell me it's wise to spread our fleets thin."

"We'll have a better chance of slowing an assault. If Veers *does* decide to put *Nemesis* into action we'll have to scramble a full fleet to stop it. One or two ships will at least sound the alarm and let us know what we're up against."

"Very well. I'll consider your suggestion and speak about it to the Emperor."

"I've already told him about it myself. He's quite amenable."

"Good to know," Hallis said dryly and looked to Vitor. "If you have a suggestion as to the role your Imperial Knights can play, please let us know."

"There's less than a hundred Knights in the whole Empire. We can't spread ourselves wide. But I do think we can be useful in other ways."

"Such as?"

"We need to find the big nest somehow. Director, I know your agents have been working for years to track down Veers. The Chiss have their own intel teams but they haven't found him either. I think, as Imperial Knights, we may have skills that your people don't."



Lots of non-Force-users didn't like being reminded about that sort of thing; Vennefara took the comment with an unreadable nod. "Do you have a specific plan in mind?"

"We've pretty much verified that *Nemesis* is hiding in an uninhabited star system. That means Veers needs to bring in supplies. Food, water, fuel for the ship, material for repairs, all that."

"My people have been very thorough in tracking the movement of those things," the Elomin said. "It's how we've found several Restorationist military clusters in the past."

"But it didn't lead you to Veers. Have you considered that they might be getting supplies from outside Imperial space?"

"We've all considered that Veers may be hiding in an Alliance system," said Hallis. "We've alerted Coruscant to that possibility. As of yet, we haven't found anything."

"Well, maybe the Imperial Knights can have a longer reach than any of your people."

That gave them pause. It was a well-publicized fact that the Imperial Knights were no longer part of the Jedi Order, that their loyalty was to the Empire and its people above all else. There were plenty in the Imperial hierarchy who harbored doubts over whether the Knights were truly as separate from the Jedi as they claimed.

Sometimes Vitor wished those doubts were justified, but his parents had been severe in their break with the Order. Some personal communications were allowed; Vitor spoke with his grandmother Jaina from time to time via the HoloNet. More rarely he'd spoken with his uncle Arlen. He hadn't seen his cousin Marin, who'd once been as close as a sister, in eight years.. He knew from his uncle that Marin was working as some kind of Jedi ranger in the Outer Rim, which seemed the very opposite of the life she'd have had if she'd stayed on Bastion. He wondered if she was happy with it.

"We won't overstep our bounds and we won't work with the Jedi," Vitor told them. "But we will be able to reach into new areas your people can't."

Hallis asked, "Have you spoken with your mother about this?"

"Just this morning. She endorses the idea. And no, I haven't talked to my father yet. I'm sure he'll make the final decision." Vitor was Prince of the Empire but he knew when not to press his vague authority on people three times his age. He hoped they respected him more for it. "There's no reason we can't keep serving the Empire *outside* our borders."

"No, I suppose there is not," Vennefara said. As usual the Elomin was impossible to read, even in the Force. "Very well. I'll start to consider how we can-"

The commlink in his pocket started to buzz. A tiny bit of consternation leaked through in the Force but with a stolid face and cool voice he turned on the comlink and said, "This is the Director. I hope this interruption is important."

As he started speaking Hallis' comlink went off as well, which was a pretty sure sign this *was* important and probably not a good sign. Two half-heard voices buzzed at once and both officials turned them off at the same time. When Vennefara showed a scowl Vitor knew things truly were bad.

"What happened?" he asked them.

Hallis reached over to the control panel for the conference room's table and turned on the holo-projector. What immediately sprung to life was an INN broadcast showing a scene of chaos in Bastion's low orbit. It took Vitor a moment to recognize the remains of Skyhook One, the low-orbital station that handled much of Bastion's incoming civilian ships. It looked as though it had been shattered into a half-dozen flaming pieces that were drifting slowly apart. Vitor spotted frigates swooping low to grab them in a tractor beam before they could fall into the atmosphere and impact on the planet below. Even if they succeeded the death toll would be in the thousands.

Hallis tapped the controls to bring up the audio, and the INN announcer- a female Devaronian in a crisp civvie suit- explained, "Our contact with Bastion Orbital Traffic Control had just provided us with the name of the ship that collided with Skyhook One. BOTC names the craft as a heavy Damorian VB-100X-type freighter called the *Heavy Hauler*, registered as outbound from

Corsin. As our audience knows Corsin is an Alliance world and we are not certain if this craft is registered to an Alliance or an Imperial company.

"If you're joining us you can see the destruction of Skyhook One that took place less than ten minutes ago over Bastion. We have no judgment as to the cause of the collision, and it will probably take BOTC some time to analyze whether the attack was accidental or-

Hallis turned off the audio. "Look at that damage. That's not a collision. The ship must have fully docked inside the Skyhook and then exploded."

"What could have caused that damage?" asked Vitor. "Some kind of engine core overload?"

"To destroy Skyhook One like that? It must have been loaded with explosives."

"Unlikely," Vennefara said, "Skyhook One had some of the best security scanners in the galaxy."

"Any security system can be beaten." Hallis scowled at the holo. "I know an intentional detonation when I see one."

Vitor's jaw dropped. "You think this was-

"So it was as I predicted," Vennefara said without a hint of satisfaction. "I just didn't expect Veers to do something so... brazen."

"They've moved beyond guerilla fighting to outright terrorism," Hallis nodded.

Vitor was speechless with shock; not just for the sudden ferocity and naked barbarism of this attack but because he'd had no anticipation of it at all. It was hardly the first time his inexplicable dreams had failed to prophecy an important event- they'd given him no peek at the huge battle at Entralla four years back- but as he stared at the holo he felt, as he never had before, that the Force itself had failed him, and in doing so had failed the thousands of innocent lives snuffed out over Bastion.

"Do you think Veers will claim responsibility?" Hallis asked Vennefara. It was something else that hadn't even occurred to Vitor.

"It will be interesting to see how he spins this if he does. He won't win himself allies." The Elomin turned to Vitor. "It seems your proposal was as timely as mine. I believe the services of the Knights will become more important than ever."

Veers made his broadcast, as he always did. Since the beginning Davek had tried to stop his public pronouncements using any means necessary, but it had proven surprisingly difficult. There were thousands of communications arrays in the Empire and all the Restorationists had to do was slice into one to start casting their message across the entire system for all the Empire's people to view. On Davek's orders increasingly sophisticated security software had been installed in the communications system, but again and again the Restorationist slicers found way to access the system and play their messages on all channels. The only way to stop the broadcast was to shut down the entire comm system and plunge the whole Empire into blackness.

The very fact that these transmissions kept getting out was cause for shame and anger. The circumstances of this speech left Davek feeling positively wrathful. Since Entralla four years ago he'd been dreading the day when the Restorationists gave up their meager hit-and-runs on military installations and went straight for civilian targets. Veers and Grave had lost the chance to win this war long ago, and their only hope in fighting now was to cause as much damage as possible.

Sometimes Davek wondered what he'd done to inspire such rabid ferocity in his opponents. Proclaiming himself emperor had been a bold step, yes; not just an affront to Palpatine but an intentional rebuttal. Those who still glorified the old emperor were bound to hate a new one so different and if any other man were in Davek's position now he might draw the same ire. In fighting Veers and Grave, Davek wasn't just battling particular fanatics; he was fighting to keep Palpatine, Tarkin, Darth Vader and the rest in the graves where they belonged.

He'd seen plenty of Veers' broadcasts before, and as he watched this one in the commander's office at the Yaga Minor Shipyards he

noticed the familiar things and the subtle differences. The ex-moff stood in front of his usual podium with his usual row of white-armored stormies behind him and a big image of Palpatine looming above.

His voice had the familiar biting anger and defiance, but Veers was also unusually sober as he said, "What happened today should send a message to those who support the self-proclaimed emperor. Those who'd aligned themselves with a puppet for aliens and Jedi in the name of order and security have invited only chaos. Those who've betrayed the core principles our Empire was founded on in the name of expediency or compromise have invited death and suffering on the Imperial citizens they should protect.

"This is a sad day for us all. We did not *want* to attack Bastion, but we who would restore the Empire to greatness were *forced* to do so by the pretend emperor, his Jedi and Chiss puppet-masters, and all the good-intentioned and weak-willed Imperials who abide their treason.

"We've sent a message to the pretender, his puppet-masters, and his accomplices. We who protect the *true* spirit of the Empire will not go quietly. We will not stop fighting. We will strike again, and again, until the pretender realizes that his perversion of the *true* Emperor's ideal has only brought suffering and discord. We call on all *true* Imperials to rise up against the pretender and those who've sold their souls to his cause. It is only by rejecting his corruption that we can finally restore the Empire to greatness. It is only then that we can *truly* end the fighting and secure peace and prosperity for all the men and women on the Empire."

He stopped and tilted his gaze upward just a little, like he was straining his eyes to a bright horizon. Then the holo winked off.

"What a load of bantha poodoo," sneered Lukas Briggs as he sat on the edge of his desk. "He just *murdered* eleven thousand people. He can't think that's going to win him friends."

"He sounded like a man gearing up for a last stand," Marasiah said thoughtfully as she stood beside Davek.

"If we can find the bastard I'll be happy to give him one," Davek said, though he knew that wherever *Nemesis* had been hiding the

past few years must be well-hidden and fortified. When the Restorationist fire was finally snuffed out it was going to take a long and grueling siege.

"Finding him has always been the hard part." Briggs crossed his arms over his chest. "Say the word, Your Majesty, and I'll give you every ship in my 'Yards to hunt him down."

They all knew it wouldn't be that easy. Davek said, "If anything this attack means we need to spread ourselves out more. I talked with Vennefara earlier today about casting the fleets wider to defend our inhabited worlds. That'll also mean spreading ourselves thin, but if they're attacking soft civilian targets that means we have no choice."

"A destroyer or a frigate over every world will also reassure people," Marasiah added. From the start she'd been more in tune with the necessary symbols of leadership that her husband.

"Give me the specifics and I'll do what I can," Briggs said.

"Don't worry. You'll get your final orders through Hallis," Davek said. He'd made himself emperor but he didn't want to become a tyrant. Men like Briggs, Hallis, and Vennefara- men he could trust- he'd let keep a good deal of individual power. Even the Moff's retained autonomy over their sectors, though Davek made sure the elections were carefully managed to keep out potential governors with Restorationist sympathies.

"Spreading our ships is necessary, but it's still playing defensive," Marasiah added. "He'll strike again and again until we find the big rat's nest."

Briggs smirked at the phrase. Despite being First Knight and Empress, Marasiah kept up-to-date on soldier's slang and used it appropriately. Part of it was that ever-conscious symbolism, but deep down a part of her remained the TIE pilot he'd first met.

"I'm really interested in finding out how that freighter got filled with explosives," Briggs said. "And who owned it in the first place. There might be something we can trace there."

"I've already talked to Vennefara," Davek said. "He's looking into it."

"Did he also mention Vitor's idea?" Marasiah asked.

"Only briefly, and I haven't talked to Vitor yet. It sounds like you have."

"You can guess what it is. He wants to use the Imperial knights to track Restorationist activity outside the Empire. Since this ship came from Alliance territory that sounds like a place to start."

Davek refrained from comment but their eyes held, passing familiar hesitation between them. Neither of them *liked* sending their sons into potentially dangerous situations. Waiting for results from Ansion, and the subsequent news that Roan had been captured and nearly killed, had put Davek through a hundred awful emotions in the space of an hour. Vitor was older, more experienced, and exceptionally talented in the Force, but odds were that if he took the lead on this next mission Roan would insist on coming with his big brother. Davek and Marasiah could refuse him that, but it would crush the young man's confidence just when he needed it strong.

Leading and empire and fighting a war were difficult enough tasks; raising two sons in the middle of it all sometimes felt like the biggest challenge.

"We should speak with Vitor together," Marasiah told him. "And Roan. Hear what they have to say."

Briggs awkwardly cleared his throat. "If I may make a comment, Your Majesties?"

An Emperor shouldn't drag his personal problems before a third party; he also shouldn't look afraid to discuss them once he already was. "All right, General. Go ahead."

"That we've come this far speaks to the new Empire we've made under your leadership. We all serve where we can. And we all do whatever we'll willing to do. I believe my daughter is the same age as Prince Roan. She's already signed up for infantry training at the academy on Presfbelt. Wants to be a stormtrooper like her father, apparently. I'm proud of that. Concerned and worried, of course, but proud also. I never thought of standing her way."

Davek wanted to tell him that a trainee stormtrooper and Imperial Knight faced drastically different threats, but at the core of it he was right. "Thank you, General. I understand."

Briggs nodded, then quickly found a new subject to discuss. As Marasiah had said, they'd reckon things with their sons later, in private. Yet even now, Davek knew what the end result would be. He might have been ruler of the entire Empire, but sometimes the battles closest to him were the ones he knew he would lose.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Over the past few years Marin Fel had gained friends in strange places. One of the strangest places, and one of the strangest friends, was found in the Tolomen System. Even by the standards of Outer Rim locales Tolomen took a while to get to, and once there the whole system appeared uninhabited to even the most rigorous of scans unless one was lucky enough to spot a ship slipping in or out of a certain moon swinging around a gas giant.

The satellite had been impacted by a stray astral body millennia ago and despite its cracked-open appearance it retained a steady orbit over its planet. Sections of Broken Moon had been hollowed out a generation back and made into a hidden shadowport popular with thieves, smuggler and especially drug-runners. It had passed through several changes of hands over the years but it retained its status as a rendezvous point for the galaxy's fringers. Its owner nowadays moved more information than hard merchandise but it was enough to keep a rich flow of credits going.

It had been here that her parents had first met. Many years later Marin had first come here on a mission that had irrevocably changed her life. It seemed unlikely that it would become one of the

few places where she felt somewhere close to home, but she'd realized her life was a construction of improbabilities.

When most vessels arrived at Broken Moon and requested access they were guided through a series of guarded tunnels that wound inside the rocky guts of the satellite. Because of her special status Marin's X-wing was allowed to land in a small private hangar accessible through the moon's surface via a camouflaged portal. Once there, she was escorted to a small but lavishly decorated chamber to meet the master of Broken Moon.

Marin didn't remember who'd said the best revenge was living well, but Sherev'ath had turned it into a maxim. The former Twi'lek dancing girl had been able to escape from her master- and ultimately kill him and take over this facility- thanks to Marin's parents, and she always let Marin sample some of her gratitude on these visits. Even before Sherev'ath showed up a succession of servants- all humanoid males, very attractive and partially clad- came in and offered Marin a variety of exotic food and drink. The first time Marin had come here and gotten this treatment she'd been suspicious, and while she never let her guard down totally she'd realized that Sherev'ath's goodwill was mostly genuine; both toward Marin's parents, and to her personally.

When she finally appeared, the Twi'lek stalked into the room trailing loose rainbow-tinted shimmersilk robes that left her blue limbs bare. Sherev'ath had almost twenty years on Marin but most of them didn't show. She helped herself to some of the Hestrian wine Marin was already sampling and set herself down on the same plush velvet sofa.

"This was all I could throw together on short notice," the Twi'lek said as she crossed one leg over the other. "I hope you appreciate it."

"After spending the past three days on an X-wing it's good to have fresh food." In truth Marin wanted to stretch her stiff legs, but this moon base didn't have much walking space and their conversation had to stay private.

"I really don't know why you don't get yourself a better ship," Sherev'ath shook her head. "Something with room to stand *and* a nice kitchen."

"Sorry, my budget's limited."

"I'm sure you could convince the Jedi to give you something else." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Or perhaps you don't *want* handouts from the Order."

Every time they met the Twi'lek liked to badger her and imply that a Jedi's life was not where she belonged. Sherev'ath seemed to have taken her ranger status as evidence for the fact.

"Jedi are taught to do more with less," Marin smiled sourly.

"Doing more with more is easier." Sherev'ath reached and ran fingertips down the soft gold-and-red silk curtains covering the chamber's carved-stone walls. "All right then, Jedi Knight. You clearly came here on some important business where the fate of the galaxy hangs in balance yet again. How do you think I can help?"

"I'm looking for information."

"Of course you are. What specifically?"

"My dad's on Arquilla now trying to help settle things down. It's not easy when outside gunrunners are supplying military-grade weapons to radical Tynnan groups. I'd bet a lot of credits that you've heard something about that."

"I thought you *don't* have a lot of credits."

"You know what I mean."

"I do. And you've come all this way just on the hope I might know something and subsequently tell you." She tipped her wine-glass toward Marin's. "Or perhaps you were really enticed by superior refreshments and the high quality of my servants."

"I can't say I don't appreciate the hospitality."

"The servants also?"

"I like them just fine. But you're chasing me off the topic."

"Am I?"

"I'll be more specific. The Tynnan partisans have been found using Arakyd heavy infantry weapons. I've got a source that tells me a shipment from Arakyd matching that description got nabbed by

pirates off Celanon three weeks ago. Have you heard anything about that or similar hijackings?"

Sherev'ath got that distant look as her mind worked. She was hard to read with the Force in most circumstances and it was especially hard to glimpse her thoughts how.

Marin threw in the last bit. "I've heard it's connected to one of the Hutt syndicates."

That lit of spark of recognition Sherev'ath couldn't hide. "I don't suppose you know which one."

"No, I don't. Do you?"

The Twi'lek allowed a little sigh. "The Hutts make a point not to keep their business opaque to outsiders."

"You're not a normal outsider."

"Very true. Tell me about your other source. Family?"

Marin had a pretty diverse family, but only one side was likely to know about arms piracy. "It came through family, yes."

"And that's *all* they know?"

"I just told you everything."

Sherev'ath went thoughtful again. She pushed out of the sofa and, wine glass still in hand, started pacing the room in long steady strides. "I can't tell you anything about which Hutt family might be involved. It could easily be more than one."

"But?"

"There's been three separate pirate raids on Arakyd shipments, not one. Whoever's been hitting those cargo vessels clearly has someone inside the company. BlasTech has also lost two shipments in the past three weeks, near Roche and Gizer. There's no indication there's one person coordinating all these raids, but they are suspicious."

It was interesting but not much more helpful than what Jovar had told her. "What else?"

Sherev'ath finished the last of her wine and set it on the low table between them. "I've heard rumors of a Hutt syndicate with a large storehouse orbiting Lantilles that's supposed to be very active of late."

Marin frowned. "Lantilles is an Alliance world. It's law-abiding."

"What better place to hide a shadowport? I'm sure few well-placed bribes were all it took to get the honorably elected government to look the other way."

"You think this place is big enough for them to move stolen weapon shipments through?"

"So I've heard. Also take note: Gizer, Roche, and Celanon are all less than a day away from Lantilles with a fast hyperdrive."

The lead sounded worth checking out. As much as Sherev'ath seemed to like Marin personally, she knew that wasn't why the Twi'lek was giving her this information. The operation she ran on Broken Moon was relatively modest but sometimes it placed her in competition with bigger, richer Hutt syndicates. Any damage Marin could do to Hutt operations would be a win for Sherev'ath.

"Do you have anything more specific about where I can find this storehouse?" asked Marin. "Lantilles has a lot of orbital stations."

"I know." Sherev'ath frowned in thought and Marin could sense her indecision.

She knew better than to try Force suggestion on the Twi'lek, so Marin tried something else. "It's all right if you're not sure. I can call a team of other Jedi and we can start combing the stations for evidence."

"I have one clue for you, Jedi," the Twi'lek said. "I've recently come into possession of several decryption codes for transmissions used by prominent Hutt syndicates. If you monitor comm traffic over Lantilles you should find something that leads you to the storehouse."

Marin understood why she wouldn't want that one to get out. "Which families?"

"Anjiliac. Vosadii. Desilijic. Ippet. And more."

Marin whistled. "I'm not even going to ask how you got those."

"Good. I would... consider lending you those codes."

"*Consider?* What do you want in exchange?"

Instead of answering she asked, "Tell me, what do you plan to *do* with that storehouse once you find it? You Jedi aren't part of the Alliance. From the rumors I've heard they're not in the mood to hire your services either."

That killed one lie Marin had planned to use. She said, "Nobody hires Jedi. We work for free."

"More's the pity. You could be a rich woman if you used your powers a little more selfishly."

Marin caught a bit of jealousy in her tone. "If you must know, we're helping a private citizen with interests on Arquilla."

"So once you find the storehouse on Lantilles you won't bring the long strong arm of Coruscant down on it?"

Marin sighed. "Just tell me what you want. Am I supposed to destroy that storehouse for you?"

"I'd rather you liberate it."

"You mean let *you* have what's inside."

"Yes. Oh, I wouldn't fund any upstart rebel movements anywhere. My predecessor tried that and how did that work for him?"

"You emptied a dozen blaster rounds into him."

"Exactly. Unlike Krux, I know to keep a low profile. Nothing good ever comes from meddling in galactic politics. Something you Jedi should learn. No, I'll sell off the goods to different private buyers. I know many local militias that could use those weapons."

"*If* I keep them intact for you."

"You will. Otherwise this is the last favor you'll get from me, *Jedi*."

That last word stung a little. In her work in the Outer Rim, Marin made trades all the time with criminals. Sometimes dirty deals had to be done to secure the greater good. Sherev'ath was no different, but she knew none of this was ideal Jedi behavior. Normally that didn't bother her. Being an apprentice on Ossus had been stifling; the lessons and training had felt dry and too often abstract. Here on the fringe she was using the Force powers she'd earned to get results. It made her feel more a Jedi than ever, even if

some of the instructors safe in the Temple might have quibbled with her ethics.

"What do you want me to do? Send you a hail once I infiltrate?" Lantilles was a week-plus trip from Broken Moon.

Sherev'ath smiled. "I'll give you a recorded beacon to broadcast. My team will be ready and waiting to help secure the storehouse."

"Your team? You mean mercenaries."

"A good investment, considering the profit potential."

"You hate Mandalorians."

She rolled her eyes. "There are good mercs in this galaxy besides your tin-head relatives."

"All right, fine." Marin stood up and extended a hand over the table between them. "Give me the transmission codes and the beacon. I'll get you whatever's inside that storehouse."

Sherev'ath eyed it but didn't shake. "Tell me, you don't plan on taking that storehouse all alone, do you?"

"You just said you'll be sending backup."

She rolled her eyes again. "I was just wondering whether you'd call your father's Jedi or your mother's Mandos for help."

Marin already knew, so she smiled tightly. "Trade secret."

"Of course." Sherev'ath looked down at the hand as though judging all it meant. Then she reached out and shook. As Marin had learned a while back, that small blue hand had a strong grip that promised and threatened in equal measure.

*Beskar* was a miracle metal. Once properly forged from ore buried deep under Mandalore's mountains it became nigh-invincible. Lightsabers left only a scratch. Blaster rifles made only tiny dents, even when fired at close range. Only the most extreme heat caused it to lose its impregnable shape. Mandalorians liked to brag that *beskar* was the perfect embodiment of the unbreakable Mando spirit. Tamar Skirata had seen enough of the galaxy, as a Mando and as other things, to know that wasn't true, but she still appreciated the sentiment. Even if the ideal could never be lived up to, it was a good thing to strive for, so long as you accepted you could never fully reach it.

That was what Tamar had decided after returning to Mandalore after almost twenty years, spent first as a Jedi apprentice, later as an all-purpose mercenary and bounty hunter. She'd been a mother during those years too, though she hadn't felt like one until after coming back and living with her clan here in the mountains of Kyrimorut. Marin stopped by to visit every few months; not often enough and never long enough, but whenever she did it left an afterglow that lifted Tamar's spirit for days.

Less than a week after Marin's one-night appearance, her cousins Dorn and Mekk reappeared, having successfully captured their bounty and handed him over for the reward. The job had been a little hairy; both of them came back with a lot of small but noticeable dents in their armor, not to mention lots of dirt through what Dorn later explained was a very messy chase through some muddy swamps on Mimban. *Beskar* was nigh-unbreakable, but it was still important to keep the stuff clean, so Tamar spent the day after their return helping them wash and polish their gear until it shined.

"You need to come with us on the next job, *Tam'ika*," Mekk said as he dried his chestplate. Like Dorn and Tamar he had a thin frame and black hair, and a pale, jagged scar crossed the bridge of his nose.

"Really? I didn't realize you'd want to split the bounty three ways," she told him.

The warrior shrugged. "Wouldn't mind if it's a big enough bounty. Having your *jetii* powers could come in handy."

"I'm not a Jedi. Never was." He always gave her *osik* about her inherited Force-powers, never seriously, but enough to get on her nerves sometimes. He never gave Marin anything, which was good at least.

"Still, you have the talent." Mekk looked over at Dorn, who was checking the inside of his helmet. "Shame about Jovar, isn't it? If he'd have polished his Force skills he could've really struck it rich."

"Jovar does what Jovar wants," shrugged Dorn, who didn't want to be dragged into this conversation again.



Mekr looked back to Tamar. "I'm only saying that in our line of work, it's best to use *all* your talents. Good for credits. Good for saving lives too."

He hesitated as he said the last bit. He was surely thinking of what had happened eight years ago, when nine members of Clan Skirata had gotten ambushed and killed by a Sith Lord on a mission Tamar had pulled them into. Nobody had ever implied it was Tamar's fault, not once; they saved all their anger for Retor of Kuhvult, who was still out there somewhere, doing whatever Sith Lords did, surely nothing good.

For Tamar, though, those last words took her mind back further. Her sister Nyal had been killed by a Sith too, and from what Arlen had told her that nasty Barabel was still breathing, probably lurking and scheming right with Retor. If she ever got a sure shot at vengeance she'd mutter thanks she wasn't a Jedi and take it right away.

She knew that feeling well; her long grudge against Gevern Auchs had ended in a way she'd never expected and never wanted. For a time she thought it would only make things worse, but her daughter's killing of Auchs had resulted in a better *Mand'alor* taking his place. Without it, Tamar wouldn't be with her clan now. She wouldn't be- and she dared use the word- content.

She heard feet approaching from behind and looked back to see Ninet. The young woman called, "*Ba'vodu Tam'ika!* You've got a hail!"

"From who?" Tamar got off the bench.

"Your *ad'ika*," Ninet waved. "Come on."

Tamar followed her back to the camp's communications hut. Marin's old X-wing couldn't transmit holos, so Tamar went over to the console and tapped the audio link open.

"*Mar'ika*, is that you?" she asked.

"Right here. Bet you didn't expect to hear from me this soon."

"I didn't," Tamar said. "What's going on?"

"I've got a mission, and I think I could use a little help."

Tamar glanced back at Ninet, who leaned in the open doorway with her arms crossed. "Mandalorian help?"

"That's right."

"Tell us about it," said Ninet.

Marin ran through a short summary, explaining her meeting with Sherev'ath at Broken Moon and the leads she'd acquired that could help her find a potential Hutt syndicate storehouse in Lantilles. Tamar didn't like it for a lot of reasons, Sherev'ath being the first in the series and the Hutts being the last.

"*Mar'ika*, what are you trying to accomplish in all this? You're not working for the Alliance, you're working for Chance Calrissian. Even if you knock over his Hutt storehouse and get proof of what they're doing, then what?"

"We can stop the weapons flow to Arquilla and make peace there possible. Sounds like a win to me."

"And make yourself the enemy of some Hutt syndicate?"

"I'm willing to take the risk."

"And you want us to help you?" asked Ninet.

"Mercenaries aren't generally afraid to make a few enemies. Besides, you'll stand to profit from it."

"Profit how?"

"Sherev'ath wants me to call in her mercs to claim whatever we find there. I still plan on doing that, but I'd like you guys to be there to get the best stuff first."

"Why do you need us if you've got her people to back you up?" asked Ninet.

"I need backup I can *trust*. That's you guys."

Tamar sighed. She was the last person to lecture her daughter on how to be a good Jedi but she felt she should say *something*. The worst part was that Marin could see the problems but she was willing to charge in anyway because she thought she had a way to handle them.

It was the recklessness of youth, but there was something more. Until fourteen her daughter had lived a staid, orderly life at the Imperial Jedi academy on Bastion. Then, in the span of a week, she'd killed the *Mand'alor* and been wrenched from her closest friends to live on a strange new planet. She'd hated Ossus for not being Bastion but instead of seeking solace in Imperial discipline

she'd gone out to roam the Outer Rim, still doing Jedi business but doing it by her own rules.

The afterglow from Marin's visits always went away because Tamar kept worrying her daughter would get herself killed. Marin seemed dead-set on going to Lantilles, because it was the job Arlen had given her and because she wanted to prove to herself that she could. She wasn't going to be talked out of it over a fuzzy long-range audio link.

"Well," Marin crackled over the comm, "Do you think you can round up some Mandos interested in a job?"

Tamar looked back at Ninet. The young woman, so like Marin in appearance, had that reckless, youthful gleam in her eye too.

"I think we can get a few," Tamar said without enthusiasm. "Just tell us where to meet."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Under its previous ruler, the Fountain Palace on Hapes had been a monument of centuries-old wealth and a showcase of luxury. That much remained under Queen Serissa Lohr, but so much else had changed. The grand audience chamber now had a martial air, for whenever Serissa gave speeches she gathered loyal soldiers for her audience instead of fawning, lying nobles. The wings devoted to guest rooms for visiting Duchas, each chamber as big as a mansion, had been hollowed out and turned into barracks. The secret prisons deep below the main halls had been expended greatly, though most who were sent down didn't stay long before their inevitable execution.

Most striking of all, Darth Terrid did not have to creep over rooftops and slip through hidden passages whenever he wanted to speak with the queen. There were still protocols to observe and secrets to keep, but the Sith who now ruled the Hapes Cluster made accommodations for her kin. When Terrid's Fury starfighter arrived it docked in one of the private hangars built into the oceanside cliff on which the palace perched. A handful of the queen's most loyal guards were waiting to escort him to their master's private chambers, where he could be alone with Darth Saydel.

On ascending to the rank of Lord, every Sith was given the choice of what name to take. Many drew their titles from the ancient Sith tongue, extinct for millenia but passed down in the lore of the Dark Side users. Terrid had selected the word for primal fear, a word which some believed had loaned itself to Basic and kept its meaning. Darth Xoran, the first Sith he'd met, had chosen the word for justice. *Saydel* was the Sith word for royal majesty. It was almost too obvious for a woman born princess of Hapes, but anyone who met Queen Serissa Lohr could not deny she embodied royal majesty at its most fearsome.

When Terrid arrived in the chamber he found her standing before its window, looking out on an ocean that shifted and gleamed in the moonlight. The lights were turned down to a dim sensual glow but Darth Saydel remained by the window, shapeless in her black robe, a shadow limned by silver.

"Admiral Vahl was quite complimentary," she said. "The attack of Reboam was flawless."

"Are they *all* dead?" he asked as he stepped toward her.

"Some are being sent to the labor camps. We spared others for interrogation. None provided us with anything we wanted." Her head tilted but he couldn't see her face in the dark. "It would be easier if you're spared a few Duchas for us to pick apart. Sometimes you're too eager."

"The Duchas had to die. You know they still have spies in your military. If some nobles were taken alive the loyalists might get word and scupper their last base. Then we'd have to start this all over again."

"Not if we move quickly. As it is—"

"As it is, I know exactly where the last base is," Terrid grinned.

"And how do you know *that*?"

"I placed a tracking device on a ship and left a few survivors to take it. They're in the Orelon System now."

Silence spread between them for a moment. Then her laughter filled the room; high-pitched, haughty, musical.

"Ah, I should know better than to doubt my... former teacher." She angled herself so some moonlight lit her face and shone on the

black curtain of her hair. Saydel was a beauty even in a society that bred for it.

Terrid stepped closer. "You'll have to send scouts to verify that the base is actually in the system. But if it *is* there—"

"Then the time has come." She took a deep breath, in and out. He could feel her radiate eagerness in the Force. They'd planned moment for years and a part of Terrid couldn't believe it was here.

"Are you certain you can convince Darth Wyyrlok to commit herself?" asked Saydel.

"We will convince her, together. She'll send as many Sith as she can to Orelon to make sure we end the loyalists once and for all."

Saydel snorted. "You're too certain. She's never liked to involve the Sith in fighting the loyalists. She's afraid of exposing ourselves to the Jedi before her sleeping master tells her it's time."

"She's let opportunity after opportunity pass her by," Terrid nodded. "She's also jealous of your power. That power makes you a threat and she knows that."

She arched a wry brow. "And I thought we were supposed to be *One* Sith, serving Darth Krayt's dreams."

"Hardly. But I have Lords like Inexor and Morlid to back me, and they'll bring others."

"And you're certain they'll leave themselves vulnerable?"

"No Sith Lord is invincible. I shot Darth Tigran in the back and all Inexor did was distract him for one second. When we gathered the other Lords at Orelon they'll be helpless against a few well-placed turbolaser blasts."

"It will be difficult to sort out which Lords to protect and which to survive," Saydel said. "Some will have to be killed. Wyyrlok. Maleth. Kheykid. They'd never accept our leadership. Inexor or Morlid may have to be sacrificed to kill them."

"I'm aware." Terrid smiled viciously. "As long as you don't vaporize *me*, I'll count them as acceptable losses."

"Of course." She reached out and cupped the side of his face with a soft white hand. "I plan on sending Vahl to Orelon. I'll take the rest of my fleet to Shedu Maad."

"You'll have to time the strikes for exactly the same moment. If you attack Shedu Maad first, Wyyrlok will realize she's been betrayed. And when you *do* strike, you have to grind the planet's surface to ash. I don't know how powerful Darth Krayt will be in hibernation but we can't take chances."

"You think a man in stasis can destroy a full battle group in orbit?"

She sounded coy, cocky. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it hard. "Do *not* underestimate Krayt. You've felt his presence just like I have."

Grimly, she nodded. Upon being appointed full Lord, all members of the One Sith were finally granted a look at Darth Krayt lying in his stasis chamber, moving through dreams. Even as he slept he emanated incredible raw power, the kind that brought new acolytes to their knees in awe.

"I'm aware of Krayt's power," Saydel said without withdrawing her hand. "But we have something he doesn't. His age has made him conservative. Timid. We have boldness."

"Passion," he smiled wryly.

"Exactly." She pulled her hand free, then snaked it around his back and drew him close. "What is one old man against that?"

She kissed him, finally. Terrid slipped his hands beneath her robe, felt warm flesh beneath, and drew her closer. A long time ago he'd been raised by Chiss who'd prized discipline. Then Jedi had taught him to value serenity. Even after becoming One Sith some of those lessons remained. It was only since he'd found this princess and made her into a Sith queen that he'd discovered the true source from which the Force was mastered. Through passion they gained strength, and everything flowed from there.

When the Sith had claimed Shedu Maad as their sanctuary they'd very purposely erected their fortress around the bones of the former Jedi Academy that had been hidden on this world for many years and protected by the late Jedi Queen Tenel Ka. Compared to the great pyramid on Ossus the one on Shedu Maad was a more humble thing, afforded extra prominence by its position at the edge

of a great chasm, layers and layers of the planet's unique dark-blue rock, carved over eons by river since dried. The Sith had taken that pyramid and added to much more. They'd cut a section deep beneath in which to house Lord Krayt's stasis chamber. A shield generator and weapon turrets had been placed around the site, most of them hidden in the surrounding forest. Smaller pyramids extended from the larger one on either flank, these ones made from black stone instead of blue and polished the mirror-smoothness.

Darth Kroan had a good view of the south pyramid as he stood on a balcony halfway up the main complex. Shedua Maad's two moons were both high in the sky and their silver light reflect beautifully on the structure's slanting walls. The pyramids were certainly the most aesthetic addition to the complex but for Kroan's reckoning the most important- barring Krayt's stasis chamber, of course- were the weapon and defense emplacements. They'd all been installed under his guidance long ago, back when the Queen of Hapes had been mere vermin instead of a fellow Sith. The ascension of Darth Saydel had been a great victory but he often yearned for earlier days, when paranoid Demia Lohr had ruled from the Fountain Palace and Darth Kroan had also been Retor of Kuhvult, chairman of the Kuat Drive Yards Board of Directors and one of the most wealthy men in the galaxy. With his ability to route resources and credits, he'd done more to help the One Sith than any local monarch. That was forgotten too often nowadays, even by those who should have known better.

"It is not too late to help the Restorationists," Darth Kroan told the woman beside him. "They've proven they're willing to fight and fight bitterly. They can still be a tool."

"A tool against whom?" asked Darth Wyyrlok. The Chagrian's hornless head was laced by red and black tattoos while the rest of her was draped in robes as dark as the night sky above.

"Davek Fel and his Imperial Knights will never be allies to us. I doubt they'll even be tools. We should use the ones we already have."

"The tools *you* created, and have already proved faulty in the past."



"I admit that Veers was not the most.... Effective proxy. But he's still accomplished much. Davek Fel split the Jedi Order. That sort of schism hasn't happened in millennia."

"And by involving ourselves in Imperial squabbles we invite the Jedi to side with the Imperial Knights, maybe even draw them back into the Order." Wyyrlok shook her head. "Let Veers do what damage he can before Fel finally kills him. But we will not get involved."

He tried to hide his frustration. "What about the situation in Arquilla? This is a place where we can drive fissures in the Alliance."

"The Jedi are already involved there."

"Are we shirking confrontation now? They know of our existence. We *allied* with them to kill Abeloth. A deal which worked out well for us overall, I remind you."

"That was because of what Abeloth did to them, not us. No, Darth Kroan, we will not meddle with the situation on Arquilla. I understand the Jedi are already chasing down the gunrunners. We'd risk much and accomplish nothing."

"I see." Kroan glowered at the pretty pyramid, and moonlit forest. "So we continue to huddle here.... And wait."

"Darth Saydel's hunt for the remaining loyalists is drawing to a climax. We'll assist her."

That took Kroan by surprise. While the ascension of a Sith adept to Queen of Hapes was hardly an opportunity she could turn down, Darth Wyyrlok had remained distant and cautious where Saydel was concerned. The queen was ambitious and ruthless, fine talents for both a monarch and a traditional Sith, but she lacked the loyalty to Darth Krayt that had been drilled into all those born One Sith. Those born outside the Sith were never fully One; Kroan knew that very well. Those who were young, ambitious, and inordinately powerful were distrusted for good reason.

"What happens *after* the loyalists are exterminated?" he asked Wyyrlok.

The Chagrian looked out at the night scene. Eventually she said, "We will do as Lord Krayt commands."

It was the most infuriating non-answer. Sometimes he thought Wyyrlok went out of her way to confound him. When his identity as Retor had been outed to the Jedi and his ally Veers deposed by Fel, Kroan had been forced to flee to Shedua Maad. As punishment for his failures, Wyyrlok had scarred him with a burst of Force lightning. Every time he looked in the mirror he saw a once-handsome face darkened and ugly, the constant reminder of Wyyrlok's wrath. He could almost bear the shame if she didn't keep inflicting these smaller humiliations.

"I will think on this," Kroan said stiffly and turned to leave.

"Please do," said Wyyrlok. "The time to act against the loyalists will come soon. Be prepared."

"I will," he said, and walked back into the pyramid. The thought of slaughtering helpless vermin had a certain appeal it would at least be acceptable outlet for the anger that smoldered constantly inside since failure had trapped him here.

He walked the pyramid's stone hallways and made his way toward the habitat section. After going to the lowest level, he passed through what had been abroad open foyer in the days of Jedi residence. Now it a brooding, dark space, with a loose ring of torches providing faint illumination. As he passed through the circle Kroan felt a vague presence, but he didn't realize Darth Inexor was there until the Codru-Ji stepped into a pool of torchlight right in front of him.

"Lord Inexor," Kroan said, "How unexpected."

Inexor did not step out his way. "It is late, Lord Kroan."

"I merely had a conversation with Darth Wyyrlok. My congratulations for your victory at Reboam."

"Darth Tigran was a grave loss."

"Indeed. But we'll be mounting an even larger force to destroy the last loyalists. Darth Wyyrlok said so herself."

"Did she?" Inexor seemed faintly surprised, but Kroan always had a hard time reading the four-armed alien. Codru-Ji were a strange species that began life as six-legged canids only to mature into humanoid bipeds, but even as adults there remained something animal and predatory about them.

"She did. Perhaps she's spoken with Darth Saydel or Darth Terrid."

"Perhaps." Inexor paused a moment, then asked, "Does she plan to intervene in the Empire or Alliance?"

"If you want to know you can ask her yourself."

"I'm sure you have asked her already. Your desire for a more... active One Sith is well-known."

Kroan didn't know what to make of that. His fall from grace was known to all Sith so he first took the words as mockery, but Inexor was a known associate of Darth Terrid. The Chiss clearly shared ambitions with Darth Saydel as well as her bed. Terrid was the elder of the two, her former Master, and Kroan had never determined who was leading whom in that partnership.

"Darth Wyyrlok believes we must lay low for now," he said evenly.

"We must follow the will of Lord Krayt," said Inexor, and Kroan thought he caught a touch of mockery, but the damned alien was unreadable in the Force.

If Inexor was sounding him out, maybe on Terrid's behalf, Kroan wasn't going to show everything in a surprise conversation. "Wyyrlok's will is Krayt's will. For now, we follow them. I'm sure destroying the last loyalists will be a task worthy of the Sith."

"Indeed. I have never seen you in combat, Darth Kroan."

He was old and scarred and he'd never be able to fend off a Codru-Ji with four lightsabers, but he put on a confident smirk. "Perhaps you'll be able to judge soon."

"I look forward to it."

"I'm sure you do. Goodnight, Darth Inexor. Until later."

"Until later," the other Sith said. Kroan slipped past him, out of the ring of torches, and only looked back once he was sure he was occluded by darkness. There was no hint of Inexor; nothing visible, nothing in the Force. If he wanted more he would come back. Kroan walked out of the chamber and tried to put the conversation from his mind.

Allana was preparing her shuttle for a flight to Coruscant when Tanith appeared at the bottom of the landing ramp with an urgent request to speak with her. Allana took the younger woman into the passenger lounge so she could get out whatever she needed to say.

"Your Majesty, I just got off the comm with my contact in the loyalist movement," she said.

Allana, feeling a vague premonition she might need to sit down, had taken a spot on the sofa but Tanith remained tense on her feet. "What happened?" she asked.

"I told you the loyalists had one small base and one large one. The small one has been destroyed."

Allana sighed. "How many escaped?"

"Two."

She blinked. "Two? Out of almost a thousand?"

"Yes. Our sources inside Serissa's fleet confirm the rest were either killed or exported to the labor camps."

Allana sunk back into the sofa. Past Hapan queens had a reputation for carefully selected brutality but there was nothing subtle about Serissa's action. Over the past eight years she'd been engaged in the systematic enslavement and murder of an entire class of people. By Alliance law she was a war criminal a hundred times over.

"There's more," Tanith said. "The two survivors were teenagers who escaped in a Miy'til. They said Ducha Alrau and all the other nobles were murdered by three Jedi."

"Jedi?" Allana gaped. "You mean *Sith*?"

"The survivors used the word Jedi. So did my contacts. But the survivors specified the killers were using red lightsabers and slaughtered indiscriminately."

"Sounds very Sith to me," Allana muttered. She'd assumed for years that the Sith had a presence in Hapes but despite Tanith's capable spy network they'd never had any actual evidence. Now they had what they'd been waiting for all these years and it brought no relief. "Did the survivors say anything else about the Sith?"

"They were all aliens. One was described as having four arms- and four lightsabers."

That sounded like a nightmare to fight. "What else?"

"One had horns around the top of its head. Possibly an Elomin or a Zabrak." Tanith paused significantly. "The last had blue skin and glowing red eyes."

Allana was very, very glad she'd been sitting down. The Jedi Order had only taken one Chiss as an apprentice. Ran'wharn'caspla had bonded closely with Arlen Fel and Jade Skywalker, but he'd been thought killed during the Senex-Juvex Crisis. Then, during the hunt for Abeloth eight years ago, he'd reappeared as a Sith Lord. He, Jade, and Jodram Tainer had worked together to destroy the ancient abomination once and for all, but the Chiss had escaped with his kind and disappeared. Deep down Allana had known it was only a matter of time before he resurfaced; Jade had known it too.

"Is there anything else?" Allana asked weakly.

"Not from my contact," Tanith said. "Your Majesty, I think this makes it all the more imperative that I meet with the loyalists."

That the situation was more dangerous than ever made Tanith more determined to charge again. Allana smiled faintly; she'd not expected anything less. "I understand."

"Have you talked to the Alliance about procuring aid?"

"I was about to head over to Coruscant to speak to the triumvirs. I'd just gotten a spot on their schedule." Allana didn't try to sound hopeful; they didn't need dishonesty right now. "Even Kyrr Esch isn't gung-ho about this."

"What Serissa is doing is a slaughter. She's as bad as Darth Xoran. The Alliance stopped her."

Allana sighed. "It was more complicated than that and you know it. Senex-Juvex was at least a part of the Alliance until Xoran took it over. Legally the Alliance recognizes this government, here on New Hapes, as our real one."

"If Serissa's power isn't recognized by the Alliance then, legally, a military expedition in the Hapes Cluster wouldn't constitute an invasion."

"A war is still a war, Tanith. Nobody in the government wants that."

"We have to do something."

"I know. I'll talk to the Triumvirs. I'll also ask around and see if we can't arrange transport and escorts on private channels."

"What mercenaries would fight a war with Serissa?"

"I don't know, but I'll look at all out options." She fixed Tanith a hard stare. "When do you plan to go there?"

"I'd like to leave as soon as I make arrangements. Within a day."

"You have people you'll take with you?"

"Of course."

"If there's Sith involved in this you'll need more."

Tanith looked hesitant. "You know how the loyalists feel about Jedi."

"Well, if we're going to stop Serissa people need to get past old prejudice and old grudges. I hope you've been telling them that."

"I have. But telling them is one thing. Parading Jedi in front of them is another." Tanith knew she had a losing argument, so she added, "At least make sure all the Jedi are women. And human."

Allana smiled tiredly. "Wouldn't want the shock to kill them. Go make your arrangements. I'll make mine."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Tanith said, and gave a short stiff bow. The woman hadn't always been this formal. Since Allana had officially received the queen's crown two years ago, Tanith had started showing more deference.

Once Tanith was gone Allana went into the shuttle cockpit, dropped into the co-pilot' seat, and fired up the comm system. She'd definitely hail Ossus and ask Grand Master Lowbacca for some human female Jedi Knights to send to the Hapes Cluster, but there was someone else she needed to talk to first.

Allana was up-to-date on the situation on Arquilla, which seemed to be getting worse and worse. The Jedi may have heroically saved lives but nobody seemed in a hurry a thank them. The assassination attempt by Tynnan extremists had scuppered Senator Toreena's talks and Jade had been left without the job she'd come there to do.

The solace was that she was getting to spent time with her son Nat, and when Allana hailed *Starlight Intruder* it was the long-haired teenager whose holo-image appeared before her.

"Oh, it's you!" the boy's eyes lit up. No deference from that one. "We weren't expecting a call. Do you want to speak to Mom or Arlen?"

"I need a word with your mother please."

"All right. I'll get her."

Nat didn't seem to pick up the gravity in Allana's tone, but when Jade stepped into view thirty seconds later she had a serious expression. She couldn't have known what Allana was calling for, but she'd surmised it wasn't good news.

"I hope this isn't a bad time," Allana said to soften the blow.

"Not really. It's about time for bed here, but we're all still up. What is it, Allana?"

"Nothing about Arquilla. I just spoke with Tanith Zel, who's been communicating with loyalist insurgents in the Hapes Cluster recently. She just got a very distressing report."

"Sith?" Jade breathed. She'd been expecting it too.

"Three of them were seen in action, killing a number of nobles. Jade, one of them was a Chiss."

The other woman closed her eyes. Allana couldn't imagine all that was running through her head just then, but when Jade opened them she said, "Tanith is going to take a team to the loyalists' last base to negotiate. I'm trying to put together an evacuation of their people but honestly I don't know where we're going to get the manpower. I'm also going to ask Lowbacca for some Jedi to send along. It might rile the loyalists but if there's Sith involved it might be the only option."

"Are you asking me to come?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm just telling you what we know. You deserve to know."

"Thanks. I think the reasons I deserve to know are the same reasons I need to be there."

They both knew this choice was inevitable from the second Allana made the call. Grimly she said, "I'll leave it to Lowbacca to assemble the team. If you want to be part of it, contact him."

"I will. Thank you for telling me all this."

"Just be careful. Please."

"I will."

"Give my love to Arlen and Nat."

Her son's name made Jade flinch a tiny bit. "I will. Thank you."

As Jade reached for the button to turn off the link Allana said, "I'll talk to you again."

A hope, more than anything. Jade nodded and shut off the link, leaving Allana alone in the cockpit, wondering if she'd soon regret what she'd done.



## CHAPTER NINE

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As Imperial Knights, Roan and his brother had infiltrated enemy bases and masqueraded as civilians or criminals in pursuit of Restorationist cells. This was the first time they'd done it outside Imperial Space, and that alone made it feel different. There were other teams of Knights on this same mission, disguised as fringers and using battered Corellian freighters as they sought the source of the terrorist attack on Bastion, but this was unfamiliar territory and it made Roan feel alone.

Vitor didn't show it, but he wouldn't have. Mohrgan was visibly on edge and so was Treis, though he hid it better. Things would get smoother, Roan hoped, once they actually started *doing* something. As it was, their team had been instructed to fly out along the Perlemian Trade Route while another team paid a visit to the port at Corsin from which the terrorist's ship had launched. They might be called to Corsin themselves or they might be sent elsewhere; a half-dozen teams of Knights had been scattered and waited to go wherever they were needed.

Waiting was the worst part because you had too much time to start wondering how things could go wrong, after two days of hovering outside the hyperlanes between Chazwa and Tanaab they got their hail, and all four young men crammed into their CT-2000

freighter's cockpit to speak with Yarin Sept, leader of the Corsin team.

"Thank you for your patience," the older Knight said. "The investigation took longer than we'd hoped."

"What did you find?" asked Vitor.

"The ship the terrorists used to destroy Skyhook One was listed as belonging to a commercial shipping company based on Axxila, but when we went there we found its corporate offices empty."

"A shell company," said Roan. "Did you trace its owners?"

"We had to persuade the government on Axxila to share their incorporation records, but yes. That company is owned by *another* one incorporated on Celanon. We were able to access records for the Celanon company and found it's an umbrella owning a half-dozen other units besides the Axxila company."

"So what are we getting at here?" frowned Mohrgan. "Do we think all these companies are owned by Veers? Is this how he's been getting supplies and stuff the past few years?"

"It's possible, but the Celanon company was created twelve years ago. That's public record. The Axxila company was created five years ago."

Roan suggested, "Veers could be working with some criminal syndicate and using their network to shuffle money and supplies."

"And civvie ships loaded up with bombs," Treis added darkly.

"His Majesty the Emperor was very thorough in going after Veers' financial resources," Sept told them. "We've suspected he's been relying on criminal ties the past few years, but we've never had a good lead on them until now. It's unpleasant to say, but that attack on Skyhook One did us a favor. If we can trace his supply lines we may even be able to find *Nemesis*."

Vitor sighed. "What do you need us to do in all this?"

"You're a short jump away from one of the other shell companies. It's listed as a shipping and storage firm on Lantilles. I'll transmit its commercial address at the end of this message."

"What do we need to do once we get there?"

"Observe. Investigate. Infiltrate if you can. Our theory is that the criminal group provided the freighter and its cover and

Restorationist agents set the explosives. If there's anything on Lantilles- anything in their records or computer systems- that can verify or deny that, we need to know. If you can figure out which criminal syndicate is actually behind all of this, even better."

"You've got other teams checking the other sites?" asked Roan.

"Yes. We're on our way to Taris now."

"Then may the Force be with you," said Vitor. "We'll let you know what we find."

"Thank you. Be safe, Your Majesty," Sept said and killed the link.

Roan felt his brother flush with embarrassment at the other Knight's sign-off. In theory, seniority decided ranks among Imperial Knights, but as the Emperor's sons they were showed reverence when it wasn't strictly their due.

Embarrassment rolled off Vitor easily. He looked at the young Knights and said, "Okay, you've heard the man. Let's head to Lantilles."

The planet's low orbit was thick with a constant stream of inbound and outbound traffic. Heavy industrial transports lifted off from the surface. Light cargo ships, personal shuttles, and medium scouts docked and detached from berths aboard the space stations and skyhooks. Lantilles was one of the primary transport and industrial hubs on the Perlemian Trade Route, and with all the ships moving about nobody paid much attention to a single ovoid light freighter sitting high above the world's largest orbital station.

The *Bottom Line* angled itself to look straight down on the station and the broad grey planet beneath, and through the cockpit viewport Tamar Skirata examined the artificial structure. From straight above it looked rather like a gigantic dejarik board, with two dozen exactly equal square compartments arranged in a grid. The station's lower layer was a disc for smaller vessels to dock at, but this main grid was a collection of industrial-grade storehouses, each with its own access station for heavy cargo ships to dock at. According to her daughter's maybe-reliable sources, the criminals

who were supplying weapons to Lantilles may have been routing their merchandise through this station.

Tamar hated just about everything in this arrangement. She hated the tenuous leads and suspected Sherev'ath was just using Marin as a pawn to strike out at a competitor. She hated that Marin had docked her X-wing in one of the lower-ring hangars and gone alone into the station's great belly to try to access the storehouses from the inside. The only that provided any comfort was that she had a good set of warriors stuffed into this ship with her, starting with its owner, her cousin Mekk. Dorn and Ninet had come too, and a half-dozen other Skiratas all enticed by Marin's offer to let them in on whatever was inside that storehouse.

*Bottom Line* had been waiting almost a full standard day in its current position, monitoring the comm signals constantly flaring in out of the station. There were too many to keep track of, but all they needed was to find some transmitter using one of the Hutt syndicate encryption frequencies Sherev'ath had provided. They set the ship's computer to alert them if the signal came up and set down for a long wait. Marin, meanwhile, docked her X-wing and explored the station from the inside.

The wait was aggravating but eventually patience paid off. Mekk called everyone to the cockpit and announced that the computer had picked up one of the flagged frequencies and traced it to a private transmitter attached to a storehouse on the grid beneath.

"What clan did the freq belong to?" asked Tamar as she hung over Mekk's pilot seat.

"Looks like... Vosadii," the scarred Mando said. "What do we know about them?"

"Not as major as the Anjiliac or Desilijic, but I've heard they've been getting bigger lately," Mekk's son Jind said from the co-pilot's seat.

Tamar tapped him on a yellow *beskar* shoulder-plate. "Patch a line in with Marin."

"Sure thing." Jind tapped on the comm console.

A few short seconds later Marin's voice came up. "I'm here," she said simply. "What's going on?"

"We've got a fix on the storehouse. They just sent a signal on the Vosadii freq from storehouse Besh-Seven. Can you get there from where you are?"

"Yeah, I've had plenty of time to look over this place's internal schematics. That sounds doable. Do we know what the message said?"

"Coming right up," Jind said, and his fingers played across the com controls again. "It wasn't very long. Hold up... Here it is."

The transmission they'd caught seemed to be audio-only and it was all in Huttese. The voice wasn't low and rumbling enough to be a Hutt and Tamar guessed it was a Nikto or Weequay. She'd picked up her share of the tongue during her years as a fringer but it had gotten rusty since her return to Mandalore. She could make sense of a few scraps: future-tense verbs, references to a shipment, and references to weapons. The word 'Arquilla' sounds almost the same in Huttese as in basic.

"That was confirmation of a pickup time for another shipment," Marin translated. "It sounded like they were talking to contacts on Arquilla."

"Sounds like we've got the place then," said Mekk. "How do we want to play this?"

"I'll scope the area from the inside first," said Marin. "Once I get a grip on how many people they've got inside, I'll call you down."

"Are we looking at hard insertion?" asked Jind. "We've been scoping out those exterior docking ports. We can probably burn through if we have to."

"I don't know yet. Those storehouses are sealed super-tight even from the inside. I'm going to try and get close to the port and sneak in from there."

"Security's gonna be tight," said Mekk.

"Be very careful," Tamar warned.

"I know. Just hold position for now. I'll comm when I get closer. Checking out."

The comm line severed and Tamar couldn't help but sigh.

Mekk leaned back in his chair and flashed her a grin like a knife-slash. "They grow up fast, don't they?"

"She has major *gettse* for a *jeti*," said Jind. "Can definitely see the Skirata blood."

"Don't get carried away with the flattery." Tamar said. "It's time for everybody to get suited up. We need to be ready to move."

Sometimes Marin wished she could have a nice set of *beskar* armor like her mother or Ninet. It was terrible for getting places without drawing attention but in a firefight it was hard to beat. Marin had more or less completed the former stage. She'd had almost a standard day to scout the insides of the great orbital station. The large storehouses were meant to be accessed from the inside as well as via the external docking ports, but both the internal and external portals connected to a single vestibule that led through a single gateway. The storehouses were pretty much impregnable otherwise, separated from each other and the rest of the station by meters-thick metals walls even a lightsaber couldn't cut all the way through.

The station was so vast and the storehouses so huge that a series of internal lifts were designed to carry personnel from a central hub to the different storehouse gateways. Marin had no doubt that if she tried to ride the lift to Storehouse Besh-7 she'd alert its owners to her presence, which meant she had to take the slow path. The Force was enough to pry open the doors and access the tube; from there it was a long, long climb up the rungs of a maintenance ladder that lined one side of the lift shaft.

After about thirty minutes of climbing the infinite-seeming tunnel she decided that, even above some *beskar'gam*, what she really needed was a good jetpack. Some Jedi could draw on the Force to give energy to their worn-out muscles but it was a skill she'd never learned, and once her arms and shoulders started to ache she began to use the Force instead to propel her a few extra rungs every time.

She knew she reached the end of the line when she saw the bottom of lift capsule sitting above her. From the schematics it looked like there was only a start and an end point for the lift and no other places it would stop, which meant that the capsule was

almost certainly parked at the storehouse entrance. It also meant that whoever had last used the thing had ridden it *into* the storehouse rather than away. That told her nothing about who'd been aboard, how many there'd been, and whether they were armed, but it was something to be aware of.

She knew that if she cut into the lift capsule and forced her way into the gateway vestibule she'd alert the gangsters inside. Instead, still clinging to the ladder-rungs with tired arms, she scanned the opposite side of the shaft. Running parallel to this lift tube was a climate control duct that carried atmosphere from the station center into the storehouse itself. She searched for the metal grate through which she could access the duct that ran beneath the vestibule, but what she found was a rectangular hole about a half-meter wide without anything to cover it.

She had look closer to be sure. Marin drew on the Force to carry her across the shaft as she jumped, but when she grabbed hold of the hole's edge she nearly cried out in pain and let herself drop. Instead she clung harder, even as the scorched edge dug into her gloved palms, and planted the tips of her boots against the sides of the shaft for purchase. Then, with an addition boost from the Force, she pulled herself head-first into the duct.

There had been a gate here all right, and somebody had cut through, probably with a plasma torch, though even a lightsaber could have left burnt marks like those. Marin couldn't tell how long ago those had been made but she didn't like them. Lying flat on her stomach, pressed on all sides by the dark compact duct, she closed her eyes and reached out with the Force. There was conscious activity above her; directly above, in fact, in what must have been the gateway vestibule. She sensed other minds, a little more distant, inside the storehouse itself. She had no idea what any of it meant but she did what she could, which was keep crawling ahead. She didn't have space to turn around if she wanted to.

Marin pulled herself with palms and elbows until she reached a place where the duct branched off in two directions: straight up and straight down. There was no way she'd be able to crawl vertically up this tight slick shaft and she wasn't crazy about trying down even

with the Force, but it seemed to be the only option. Bending her body to crawl through the narrow bend was difficult and she found herself glad she didn't have bulky *beskar'gam* on now.

She used the Force and the palms of her gloves to slow her awkward face-first slide down the air shaft. She was relieved when she found the grate that let her out into the storehouse itself, but she reached out with the Force once more to make sure nobody was nearby. She sensed presences, still faint, and awkwardly pulled her lightsaber from her hip. After that she pressed its tip against one corner of the grate and thumbed its golden blade on. It cut easily through the sides of the grate and she shut it off the second she was done. A one-handed push was enough to knock the grate outward and she reached out with the Force to slow its fall and soften the noise it made when it hit the floor. To her surprise there was no noise and there was no floor. When she let the grate go it started to float away slowly, utterly weightless.

Marin crawled out head-first and pushed herself into the great zero-g cavern of the storehouse. It made perfect sense, she realized. Moving heavy industrial objects was a lot easier without gravity and removing it entirely saved the station considerable money and energy. Still, Marin used the Force to steady herself in place and looked at the rows of storage racks that spread out above her, below her, and ahead. There must have been several hundred in here but about half of them looked like they were empty. The others contained standard heavy cargo crates ten meters long, four wide, and four high. The only way to find out what was inside was to look.

Before she used the Force to push herself toward the nearest crate, Marin looked around. There were bound to be some internal security cameras inside, and probably heat or motion sensors, but she couldn't see any on the racks or long chamber walls.

Just when she felt tentatively safe, Marin saw something flicker over the edge of a cargo crate stacked three shelves directly above her. Instead of drawing out her lightsaber she grabbed the blaster pistol she'd brought along. The inertia of firing the thing would kick her downward but she didn't want to immediately out herself as a Jedi. She used the Force to edge herself beneath the nearest crate



while she still looked up and sensed with the Force. There were multiple people three rows above her, alarmed but ready to defend themselves.

Well, so was she. Marin gave herself another Force-push and edged herself toward the crate above her. Just as she did so she felt a spike of danger behind her and kicked away. A laser blast sizzled past her shoulder and with the Force again she spun herself around and raised her blaster. Another figure- human, male- was peeking around the edge of the crate directly beneath her. A second shot just missed her and she fired back two of her own. The attacker ducked behind his cover and her shots went sizzling across the vast chamber until they shrunk to nothing.

The kickback from her blaster sent Marin flying. Her shoulders and the back of her head hit the bottom of the crate and she snarled back a swear as she fumbled out her comlink.

"Do you read me? I'm having trouble here!" she called.

"What's happening?" her mother responded at once.

"Taking some fire, here. I'm inside the storehouse... Big zero-g thing... Fierfek!"

The guy beneath her darted into view again; she popped off a shot before he could fire but he ducked away.

"Copy, we're on out way! Hold on!" Tamar said and killed the link.

Marin spotted the guy beneath her and she fired again, but once more he fell behind the cover of his crate. She sensed another one, closer by, just in time for a second male figure to bound over the edge of the crate she was using. He grabbed the corner with his hands and swung two booted feet right toward Marin; they took her in the stomach and he followed through with his blow to knock her whole body- shoulders, hips, and legs- flat against the crate's underside.

She still had her blaster and she raised it up to fire point-blank. Before she got the shot off a pure-white blade of energy burst out of nowhere and cut through her weapon. The pistol sparked apart and the barrel drifted away, unnaturally slow.

The white blade buzzed so close it took Marin a stunned second to see the face beyond. It was immediately seemed an echo of one she'd known: longer but also wider, with unfamiliar bags beneath the eyes and a few days' stubble on the chin. Everything seemed harder, more angular, than what she remembered, even as the features went slack in surprise.

She felt him in the Force too. Like his face it was similar but different, changed so much by all their years apart but instantly recognizable.

"Vitor?" she gasped. "What the hells are you *doing* here?"

The one who'd been hiding behind the lower crate swung into view. He seemed to fly toward her effortlessly, surely using a Force-push of his own. He had dark hair and tan skin and as he grew closer she realized his face was familiar too. He reminded her of another apprentice Jedi she'd known on Bastion all those years ago. Treis Sinde, all grown up.

Vitor was struggling with something to say. "Marin... Stang it, what are *you* doing here?"

Marin stared into his eyes. Those, at least, seemed unchanged after all this time. As the sheer unlikely absurdity of this situation finally struck, her awed expression relaxed into a slanted grin. "Hey, I asked first."

Vitor opened his mouth to answer when the sound of laserfire echoed through the vast space. As Sinde threw himself up toward Vitor and Marin she heard the sound of lightsabers snapping to life above and the ricochet of laser-blasts into hard metal.

As the fighting sounded above new figures fell into view. Rather than pulling themselves across the cargo-racks, propelled by the Force, they arrived on the burn of jetpacks strapped to their backs. Three green-skinned Nikto and one leather-faced Weequay dropped on the three knights as one, raised their blaster rifles, and opened fire.

## CHAPTER TEN

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As the *Bottom Line* dropped rapidly toward the exterior docking port of orbital storehouse Besh-7, Tamar Skirata's concern for her daughter was just briefly overridden by the thought that a black market facility owned by a Hutt syndicate might have hidden defenses not even a charging Mandalorian ship could break through.

There wasn't time to worry. Mekr was pushing them hard and fast toward the storehouse and right as its flat blocky form filled the viewport he shouted, "Hold on!" and wrenched his ship's controls.

Tamar was bound to the seat behind him by crash webbing, but *Bottom Line's* sudden twist nearly wrenched her out of it and smashed her helmeted head into the nearest bulkhead. As it was, her brain swam and her stomach tried to punch out of her ribcage, and then both tried to leap straight up as Mekr dropped the ship hard right onto the docking port. Metal screamed against metal, the cockpit shook one more time, and then Mekr shouted, "We're in! Oya Mando! Oya!"

By the time Tamar got out of her crash webbing, Jind and Ninet were already free and scrambling for the hold where the rest of them were already gathered. As Mekr pushed out of the pilot's seat

and fell in behind her he slapped her shoulder and said, "Don't push too hard, *Tam'ika*. We'll never keep up with the young ones."

That was the problem, she thought, but kept it to herself. She could still feel Marin's presence, not too far away. It was panicked but there was something else strange about it, she didn't know what. She came up behind Ninet just as *Bottom Line's* external laser-cutters burned through the first layer of the storehouse's sealed-tight airlock. Like all Mando ships, Mekr's was built for forcible entry.

Tamar listened as the cutters ripped a hole through the second layer. She made a quick scan of the surrounding warriors, her family: Ninet with red armor over a white body-glove, Mekr in black with a big white Mythosaur symbol painted on the face, Dorn in his customary green, Jind in slightly garish yellow and violet. Tamar was in black-and-blue *beskar* and she'd had that suit all her life, after all she'd been through. There was a reason Mandos valued dead *vode's* armor over their bodies.

When the last layer blew, *Bottom Line's* main airlock slid open. The younger, faster fighters like Jind and Ninet were at the front of the charge, and from the tang of laserfire it sounded like they had opposition waiting. When Tamar got out and joined them in the fray she saw an open space with doors on the left and right walls plus stacked-up storage crates the opposition used as cover. She did a quick count: four piled. Marin said she was in the main storage chamber, which Tamar was pretty sure lay through the large right gate.

She spotted something small arc out from behind a crate and drop toward Ninet and Jind. She immediately reached out with the Force to grab it, arrest its fall, and throw it back to the place where it had been thrown. The crate partially contained the grenade's concussive blast but the entire chamber still shook and filled with smoke.

Tamar quickly switched her helmet viewer to IR scope and charged ahead. She followed Ninet and Jind as the two warriors charged into a spray of enemy fire. Their *beskar* deflected the laser-blasts and they leaped high, atop the crates and over them. Tamar

came around from the flank to find Jind putting two shots into a Nikto's chest while Ninet wrenched a knife from a Rodian's hand and dropped him with the snap of armored elbow to green forehead.

"Try to take some alive if you can," Tamar told them. She'd never been as comfortable with casual killing since her stint of Jedi training.

She looked across the room to see Mekr and Dorn charge around another set of crates and gun down the two Klatooins behind. The room resounded with a few more blaster-shots, then all that was left was the clank of boots and armor.

"Are we clear?" Tamar called. She dared reach out in the Force; Marin was still alive and still fighting.

"Room's clear!" Mekr confirmed.

"We need to get those open!" Tamar threw an arm at the set of blast doors big enough to move cargo through. The portal opposite was much smaller, probably the entrance to a turbolift.

Dorn was already at the controls. After a few quick taps the doors began to groan open.

"*Shabla* lucky," Mekr grunted. "I thought we'd have to blow these things."

"Any sign we've alerted station security?" asked Ninet. "We made a lot of noise."

"Nothing I can tell," said Dorn. "They might have turned off built-in alarms. You can bet these guys don't want to involve legitimate authorities if they don't have to."

As the wide doors opened Tamar stepped to the threshold's edge. Her eyes were immediately drawn downward into a steep plunge. Rows and rows of industrial-grade racks for heavy cargo crates lined the chamber walls hundreds of meters down. Clear space ran down the center, about four meters square. They heard laserfire down below but from this portal, at the top of a long long drop, Tamar couldn't see much aside from light-flashed from unseen sources.

Mekr stepped beside her and looked down. "Great. How do we handle *this*?"

Ninet appeared on her other shoulder. "*Mar'ika* said this thing was zero-g. Let's find out."

She plucked a blaster from one of the dead and gave it a light toss into the vast chamber. Instead of arcing up and falling it tumbled in a straight and lazy line toward the opposite wall.

"Zero-g," Ninet confirmed.

"And like I said, how do we handle this?" snarled Mekt. "None of us have jetpacks."

"Told you we should have brought 'em, *buir*," muttered Jind.

"Well it's too late now, ain't it?"

More laserfire sounded below, and Tamar heard the hum of a lightsaber. No, more than one. She didn't know what the hell was going on down there but there was no time to hesitate. She took two steps back, then jumped through the threshold.

Gravity disappeared in an instant and left her disoriented. The sound of laserfire was enough to give her direction. The chamber spread out far below and she saw red rifle-shots maybe a hundred meters past her flailing boots. She also spotted bright, darting flares. Someone *else* had jetpacks. Lovely.

She could use the Force to give her body some direction in this zero-g void, but she'd never be as good as Marin or any real Jedi. Her family behind her couldn't use it at all. So instead she extended her left arm and prepared the fibercord grappling hook mounted over the wrist. She remembered its range, took a guess on distance, and aimed for a cargo crate two racks down. Then she let it fly.

This damned mission had taken too many turns for Roan's liking. It had been Treis' idea to climb up the long, long turbolift shaft to reach Storehouse Besh-7 and Vitor's to crawl through the air ducts and sneak up on the beings they'd felt inside. They hadn't expected the storehouse interior to be one giant zero-gravity compartment and they definitely hadn't expected a Jedi Knight to come popping out of another vent ten minutes after they did. That this Jedi was their cousin Marin- a woman they hadn't seen in eight years and had grown so much Roan barely recognized her- made things downright surreal.

Fighting an enemy in zero-g also helped the surreality. Roan had grown up in wartime and seen a lot of action, but he'd never had to use the Force to throw his weightless body back and forth across a giant chamber while enemies with directional jetpacks and blaster rifles whipped about, popping off shots.

Roan and Treis were taking cover beneath a cargo crate on the opposite wall and one level up from Mohrgan, Marin, and Vitor. Their opponents- seven beings with jetpacks- were hovering in the center of the chamber, jerking back and forth and never staying still, popping off shot after shot from their rifles that the knights were forced to deflect with their lightsabers. Only Vitor had a blaster rifle and he wasn't half as skilled with it as he was with his saber. Right now the enemy was bobbing and weaving through the air five meters away and it was impossible to score a hit without throwing themselves helplessly into the weightless void and trying their lightsabers.

Only one of them seemed game. Roan felt Marin's Force-presence, half-familiar, reach out to the rest of them and tell them to get ready. Then the woman pushed off from the crate and shot head-first across the gap. She held her lightsaber in front of her- one gold amidst four white blades- and deflected the first few shots coming at her. She used the Force to direct herself onto the jetpack-equipped Rodian nearest to her and tackled him mid-air. A flick of her saber cut off his blaster-hand. The alien wailed and both their bodies spun head-over-heels toward the wall. Then her hand found the controls to the jetpack and both of them went flying up on a burst of flame.

The others flying in the middle of the chamber turned their weapons upward and fired. Roan looked up just in time to see a dozen more bodies coming toward them and his heart fell. Treis, though, was emboldened and threw himself across the gap. He moved less gracefully than Marin but he collided with a Nikto distracted by the newcomers and used the Force to hurl both of them into the far wall. The Nikto impacted back-first, breaking his jetpack with a crunch and a flash.

Taking one more out wouldn't do them much good. The newcomers didn't have jetpacks, but they used fiberchord grappling hooks to move across the racks with surprising speed. Roan spotted a body in gleaming black armor with the bullet-shaped T-visor helmet of a Mandalorian. Another fell beside that one, armored in red, and another in green.

Against a squad of mercenaries in lightsaber-proof armor, five knights wouldn't stand. It would be Ansion all over again.

Yet as Roan steeled himself for a vicious fight the red-armored Mandalorian raised the rifle in its free hand and shot the nearest jetpack-mounted Rodian. More shots from the Mandalorians rained down, all of them aimed at the aliens who suddenly found themselves surrounded. Two jetpacks exploded, taking their riders with them. A Nikto threw away his gun and waved his hands in surrender. One jetpack took a winging shot and released a burst of thrust that slammed its rider head-first into a crate with a sick crunch.

When it was done, when all the storehouse's defenders were disposed of, a single jetpack-mounted figure thrust into the group of Mandalorians. It was Marin Fel, and she wore a relieved grin on her face.

"You all have wonderful timing," she said.

"Hell of a stash you found," the red-armored one said with a woman's voice.

"Gonna have to call up another ship to haul all this cargo back," whooped another Mando.

Roan decided the situation had crossed the line from surreal to outright impossible. He knew his cousin had a Mandalorian mother but from all he'd heard, she'd been trained as a Jedi Knight on Ossus by her father.

Marin tilted herself to find Vitor. "Come on," she called, "Let's get up top. I'll explain everything.

Vitor looked as stunned as Roan, but he nodded. Marin flew close to him and Moghran on her jetpack and said, "Come on, in zero-g this thing can take some weight."



Suddenly a grappling hook latched on to the crate next to Roan and the red-armored Mando dropped onto it, feet-first. Her body titled perpendicular to Roan's but she turned her helmet to face him and asked, almost casually, "Want a ride?"

The knights and Mandalorians worked their way out of the storage chamber one row at a time with the Force and fiberchord grapplers to pull them along. Vitor, and Mohrgan ascended more easily with their cousin's jetpack, and they were first to reach the threshold into the main vestibule. When they dropped out of view Roan felt a spike of panic from them, though he had no idea why. He and the Mando woman, Ninet, weren't far behind and he clung to her red-armored back as her grapppler pulled them both through the threshold and spilled them into the gravitized entry chamber.

They landed on their sides but disentangled when they saw what was waiting. Ninet reached for her blaster and Roan for his lightsaber but neither drew them fully. Filling the chamber were two dozen more beings, mostly human, layered in combat armor with blaster rifles aimed and ready.

Marin stood in front of all those bristling barrels with her hands raised high and prayed she hadn't miscalculated her relationship with Sherev'ath. The rest of the Skiratas clambered up through the threshold and into the chamber but none of them fired. The Mandalorians knew when odds were against them and practiced restraint; she prayed the mercenaries would too.

When she was sure she had enough armored Mandos at her back to give a trigger-happy merc pause, Marin stepped forward. A few rifle-barrels twitched to track her but nobody fired. Marin scanned the soldiers. Each wore armor of a different design; some had open-faced helms with visors, others full buckets on their heads. She spotted the blue crescent stamp on many of their outfits, variously on shoulders, breastplates, or helmets. She'd heard of Blue Moon as one of the new mercenary groups that had popped up on the Outer Rim. She should have taken the name as a hint of Sherev'ath's involvement.

She fixed her attention on a yellow-skinned Twi'lek man at the center of the group and said, "You were supposed to wait for my signal."

"We were," the Twi'lek replied from behind the barrel of his gun. "Then we saw a Mando freighter smash its way into this storehouse and figured somebody might need some help."

"These are my people. They helped me secure this place."

"Well, that's good. Some people might think you were trying to get the jump and claim all the merchandise for yourselves."

"You've seen our ship. Does it look like we can haul all this stuff out of here?"

"We've seen *one* ship. How do we know that's all you've got?"

He was putting on a hard act but she knew he didn't want to fight. "Can you get me a direct line with your boss? Let me talk to her and we can sort this out."

The Twi'lek's eyes narrowed. "Give me one minute." He ducked away from the front lines, between the shoulders of two bigger mercs, probably to get his long-range comm equipment.

"Marin, what is this?" she heard Vitor say. "What's going on?"

She glanced over her shoulder and saw him staring so many questions; his eyes amplified the confusion she already felt in the Force. What she felt, what she saw, stung hard. Vitor was looking at her as though she were a total stranger.

She still had no idea what he and his brother were doing here. They didn't have that pretty red armor on like she'd seen in news holos but they were clearly here on Imperial Knight business. She and Vitor both needed explanations, and they'd share the first chance they got, but right now she needed to make sure nobody else got killed today. With a look, with the Force, she tried to tell him that. No matter what he was thinking now she was still a Jedi; more Jedi than him.

The Twi'lek stepped back out of the crowd. He had his rifle dangling from a shoulder-strap and held up a holo-projector with both hands. An electric head-and-shoulders image of Sherev'ath blazed in front of him and she turned a familiar smile at Marin. It looked colder than usual.

"It appears you've secured your target," Sherev'ath said. "Congratulations. I see you called your family for assistance."

"It's good to have people you can trust."

"How true." She twirled a finger around the tip of one lekku. "You also haven't told your family to lay down arms."

"I'd love to say we're all friends."

"Tell me, did your lovely kin help you because you were family- albeit a half-Jedi prodigal- or did they come because your promised them a cut of the merchandise?"

Marin was still pretty sure she could end this with everyone happy. "I said they'd get the first shot. Whatever they can load back into their ship. They've got a light freighter, enough for two or three crates' worth of goods. There's at least a hundred crates here and you can have the rest. Resell this stuff to whomever you want so long as they're not Arquilla. Though you might want to do it quietly, since the Hutts are going to wanna know who knocked over their storehouse."

"I hope your tin-heads can keep their mouths shut."

"My people won't talk if yours won't. We all take what we need and get out of here. I think that's a win for everybody."

"Have you opened any of those crates yet?"

"No. We just secured this place five minutes ago and we haven't gone through their computers or cargo manifests yet. Those are what we really need if we're going to get to the source of this thing."

"I see. Now tell me, did you find this storehouse using the decryption codes I provided?"

"I did."

"And would you mind telling me which code came in handy?"

Marin had a feeling this was the last thing. With a tight smile she said, "Vosadii."

A little surprise played on Sherev'ath's blue features. "Very interesting. Well, I think we've found a suitable arrangement for everyone. Captain?"

"Yes?" said the Twi'lek merc.

"You've heard our terms. Let the Mandos have the first shot at things. Once their ship is gone, proceed as planned."

"Very good, Madam." The merc shut off the holo and raised a flat hand. The two-dozen men behind him lowered their guns.

Marin grinned at them. She'd been terrified, but exhilarated too. Victory pumped like adrenaline through her body, filling her with light-headed energy. Normal Jedi stuff- studying, practicing, negotiating, mediating- never gave the rush of knife-edge risk.

The sight of the faces behind her brought her back down. Her mother, Ninet, and the other Mandos still had their helmets on but the confusion in Vitor's eyes had only deepened. At his side was Roan with the same expression, grown so much in eight years she hadn't even recognized him until the fighting was over.

Marin hooked her lightsaber on her belt and called, "Okay, you hear all that! First let's find a computer terminal see what we've got. Shipment schedules, cargo lists, anything to save us the trouble of opening each crate one-by-one. There's gotta be an inventory somewhere."

"We'll take care of it, *Mar'ika*," said Ninet. The other Mandos were already in motion; she could tell they were eager to count the spoils from their hard work.

Marin shifted her gaze to Vitor. "I think we've got a lot to talk about."

"I think you do too," said Tamar. She wrenched the helmet off her head and looked to the Fel brothers. "Vitor. Roan. It's been a while."

"You're right," Vitor said blankly. "It really has."

"Okay, let's talk." Marin stalked over to the open door into the storage chamber. Her mother and the four Imperial Knights circled around her but she looked straight at Vitor and said, "First things first. How did you find this place and what are you here for?"

He crossed arms over his chest and replied in a voice guarded like his posture. "We were trying to track the people responsible for the terrorist attack on Bastion."

"That was Veers' people," said Tamar. "It had to be."

"Yes, but they used a ship belonging to company from Alliance space. Best we can tell that ship flew out from Corsin loaded down with enough explosive to tear Skyhook One apart, which means

Veers has outside friends. We followed a trail that pointed here. Now what are *you* here for?"

She didn't like the accusation in his voice. "This is Jedi business. The Hutts have been shipping weapons to Arquilla, fueling unrest and giving the Alliance a big headache. I'm working with my dad to stop them."

His expression softened but his eyes drifted across the crowds of mercenaries. "What about all your... friends?"

"Some of them are family. You know that. The rest are people I have to make deals with to get things done."

"What happens now?" asked Roan. "We've taken the storehouse. Will that stop these arms shipment to Arquilla?"

"I have no idea. Probably not, which is why I'll have to dig deeper."

"You mean challenge a Hutt cartel?" Mohrgan asked, incredulous.

"I don't know yet. I need to talk with my dad and see if he has any ideas. What about you?"

Vitor said, "If Veers is working with a Hutt syndicate, knocking out one storehouse isn't going to change anything. We need to dig deeper to."

"So you'll challenge a Hutt cartel." She looked at Vitor and saw something else in his eyes, something deeper than disbelief or confusion.

He looked away. "I think so."

"If we can help each other, we should." She tried to touch him in the Force, share that connection that had once come easy for them. They'd been close as brother and sister once; they shouldn't have to stay strangers.

He pulled away from her touch, and he refused to meet her eye, but he said, "Yes. You're right. We've got the same goal."

There was a lot more they needed to say to each other and they needed to say it without her mother, Roan, and the others around, but that time wasn't now. She started to reach out with the Force one more time but was interrupted by a loud, triumphant shout from Mekk.

"We're in their computers, *Mar'ika!*" the Mando called. "Come on, let's see what they've been shipping through this place."

"We should all have a look," Tamar said, and started toward Mekk and the computer. Marin followed; then Vitor and the others joined her.

Vitor tried to pay attention as they reviewed the storehouse's data files, but it was difficult. Since he woke in his bunk aboard their freighter this morning everything around him had seemed unreal. When Marin had appeared before him, floating in that zero-g storage chamber, he'd first thought had been that he was still dreaming. Then the Hutt's thugs had arrived, then the friendly Mandalorians, then a second set of mercenaries whom Marin convinced to lay down arms after a personal chat with their boss. It was absurdity piled on absurdity, but more than them it was Marin herself who'd knocked him off-balance.

After they'd first been separated, him on Bastion and her on Ossus, he'd indulged in fantasies of what it would be like to meet her again. He'd imagined they'd both be full knights, her a Jedi and he a servant of the Empire. Some mission would bring them together and that mission would in turn help heal the schism between Imperial Knights and Jedi. The bridge between them would bridge their respective orders. He'd clung to that with a young person's faith for years.

He'd never lost it exactly. Rather he'd quietly forgotten about it, misplaced it somewhere as the grim realities of youth in wartime superseded fantasies of what should have been. And yet, buried and neglected, it had always been there: the hope that the friendship which had meant so much was not gone forever.

The Marin in front of him now was not like the Marin he'd known or expected to find. In eight years she'd gotten tall and grown out like a woman; her appearance recalled her mother more than her father. More disconcerting was her behavior. Marin claimed she was helping her father and he believed her, but were it not for the lightsaber he'd never believe she was a Jedi. For all their differences the Jedi and the Imperial Knights both pledged

themselves to a life of service balanced by contemplation. In the short time since their reunion he'd sensed in her an exhilaration in recklessness coupled with hard pragmatism. It was a combination better suited for a mercenary or bounty hunter than a Force-serving knight, but from what he could sense from Marin's mother, Tamar Skirata was less than pleased with today's events too.

Even Marin he could have dealt with, transformed as she was, if not for the dream that had thrown him out of sleep four hours before their ship arrived at Lantilles. For years his dreams had never showed him false. Sometimes he was grateful for them but more often he raged at them for not warning him before the Restorationists ambushed an Imperial fleet or drove a transport loaded with bombs into a skyhook over Bastion.

Well, he'd gotten his warning this time.

As usual, he remembered only the last fleeting moment of this morning's dream. The end was enough; it was all that mattered. When he'd jerked up, shaking in his bunk his eyes had burned with the last images of a woman's face, pale and beautiful but curled into a vicious sneer. That face was lit from beneath by a sickly red glow, and he remembered his dream-vision panning down from her face to the double-bladed lightsaber in her hands, then following a hot buzzing blade as it speared right through the center of his chest.

Even now, after everything that had happened today, he could remember that beautiful, horrible face. He remembered the blade that would kill him. His visions never showed him false; he knew that, but in the hours after waking he'd tried to argue otherwise. He'd told himself the chest he'd seen impaled was not his own, or that he could somehow survive a lightsaber through the heart. He'd even indulged the old maxim that the future was always in motion. He wasn't sure if he'd believed any of it. Focusing on the mission was the only thing that had kept his nerves from breaking down.

But with Marin's appearance he couldn't deny what else he'd seen. Beyond the lightsaber, beyond that beautiful snarling woman, he'd seen a little more. There had been a second woman behind the one who'd kill him, not distant but not close enough to reach them.

On waking her face had been a blur, remembered only for its expression of shock and horror. Now he knew it for certain.

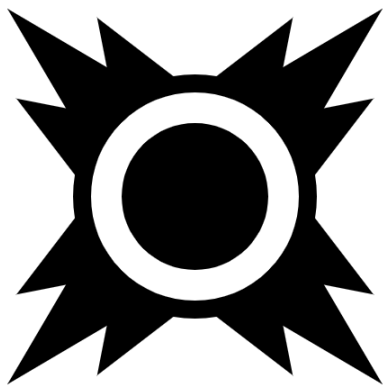
As Marin had said, they had the same goal. And they would walk it together for a time, until they encountered that beautiful woman with a double-bladed lightsaber and eyes full of murder. And they would face her together, and Marin would be there to watch him as he died.







## PART II



AFRAID OF SUNRISE



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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For a woman of Jaina Solo's age, it was only natural that her thoughts should turn frequently to death.

Zonama Sekot was an antidote to that, sometimes. It was one of the reasons why she'd spent the last few years on this world, where every speck of life contributed to a unified and single awareness that existed in the Force in a way she'd never really understood and never would. There were other reasons too. She'd come here with Kol Skywalker, who liked this lush planet so much more than barren Ossus. Her grandchildren had reached young adulthood too fast but Ben's grandson was still a child and there was much she wanted to make sure he learned.

To be here had felt an imperative after the death of Tenel Ka. That was really what had marked the change, if she was honest. Jedi Knight, proud warrior woman and reluctant queen, Jaina's friend had shouldered on as long as she could, but against the invariable depredations of age and illness there were no victors. Tenel Ka's stubborn resolve and rigorous fitness regimen, kept up since their days at the academy together on Yavin 4, had delayed the end but not stopped it. Nothing ever stopped the death of the body. As Jedi they knew that beyond death there was the Force; it was the credo

at the heart of everything. But sometimes, when faced with crude matter's unstoppable decay, credo felt like a mere hope.

There were barely any left now. Lowbacca, frustratingly in his Wookiee's prime. Tahiri, as old as her. Everyone else had gone ahead. Tenel Ka and Raynar, peacefully after long lives. Jagged after accomplishing so much. For too many others it had been too short: Ben, Zekk, Taryn Zel, Aunt Mara, Jacen and Anakin. Chewbacca. Her first wingmate in Rogue Squadron, Anni Captisan, shot down over Ithor when Jaina'd been just seventeen years old. It was amazing where thoughts went when they wandered and Jaina had a long, full life for them to range.

Back during the Yuuzhan Vong War- when she'd been so young but already old- she'd mentally resigned herself to dying before the conflict ended and walled her heart away from everyone, even Jacen and Jagged. When Luke had pronounced her Sword of the Jedi it had been more a curse than an honor. *Always will you be in the front rank, a burning brand to your enemies, a brilliant fire to your friends.* She'd felt condemned to live a loveless life of fighting until one day the fighting took her and left her family and loved ones to grieve.

She still couldn't believe she'd outlived them all.

One effect of age was that sleep was never as sound as it used to be. Jaina usually woke before sunrise and had made a habit of leaving the small, simple damutek in which she liked to see the dawn from the hillcrest west of the Middle Distance.

It was a warm season on that part of Zonama Sekot, warm and damp, but in nighttime it got comfortably cool. Jaina threw a cloak over her body, carefully walked the uphill path to the bench that overlooked the settlement, and sat down to watch. Layers of thin grey clouds hung in the east and the sun appeared not as a burning disc but as bands of red and yellow that illuminated mounting strips of milky vapor. Beneath the cloudscape was the city, such as it was: thousands of damuteks like hers, dome-shaped Vongformed shells, mixed in with higher spiraling structures crafted from yorik coral. Around it all, endless sprawling hills draped in multi-colored bora trees. On clear bright sunrises the forests gained a beautiful

rainbow sheen, but that was not to be this morning. Jaina didn't mind. Every sunrise was different on every world. As she sat on the bench she wondered how many suns she's seen rise over how many worlds. Zonama Sekot, Ossus, Coruscant, Shedua Maad, Yavin 4 where sunrise sometimes joined with planet-rise, Tatooine where twin suns rose as one to chase away deep night. Them and so many more. They seemed more numerous than all the friends she'd lost, which was a warming thought. Even if she could remember every sunrise on every world her mind could never encompass all their diverse and fleeting beauties.

When Sekot appeared beside her the living world did not announce its presence. It simply *appeared*, manifesting its planet-sprawling consciousness as a Force vision. It did not come to her often but when it did it could choose the form of any being that had visited Zonama in the past and touched its mighty soul in the Force.

This morning, as it often did, Sekot took the form of a boy barely older than Kol was now. He had dirty-blond hair, a round face and a plain pale tunic. Why Sekot preferred to meet Jaina wearing the visage of Anakin Skywalker, her grandfather as he'd met Sekot over a century ago, she didn't know, but in a strange way she'd come to like it. It spoke of the line that ran straight through all the years and turmoil, from Anakin to her; from Anakin to Kol Skywalker and whatever child Kol would bear in turn.

Eventually, when the fresh rosy colors of sunrise had changed to milky yellows and grays, Jaina looked to the living world and asked, "Are you just here for the view?"

The boy's face- so innocent, so young- turned to Jaina. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

"No. But the sun's always rising on you somewhere. Can't you see it any time?"

"It's because it's happening all the time that sunrise isn't special for me. To watch it with you, to feel it with you.... That's what makes it worthwhile."

Jaina smiled wryly. "You're saying it's beautiful because of our short little mortal's lives."

"I'm mortal too, Jaina. If someone smashed an asteroid into Zonama or launched a weapon to destroy its biosphere I'm sure it would extinguish my consciousness."

She'd never thought of it like that. Life after death was no abstract matter to Sekot. Using the great power of a living world, it could reach into the Force and pluck out the souls of those it had known who'd left their bodies behind. It could retrieve them and let them speak to those still in the flesh; for her brother Jacen it had done even more.

Sekot knew more about what came after life than any being in the galaxy, but the expression on that smooth boy's face was uncertain, almost anxious.

Jaina said, "Your consciousness would pass into the Force, like ours does."

"To become one with the Force is to lose some of what you are now," Sekot said thoughtfully. "I don't fully understand it. I can't, since I've never experienced it. When I draw souls of those I've known out of the Force I have to look for familiar shades. That's why I can only find those I've known in life. I need the memory of them to give an image to their souls."

"You mean we cease to exist as individual consciousness."

"You become something greater, and you become part of it. Your uncle once told me it's like a drop into an ocean, but does the ocean remember the drop? I'm sorry. Even if I understood, there'd be no words to explain it."

She remembered something Jacen had said a long time ago. *The truth is already greater than the words we use to describe it.* At the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, her brother had merged with the Force, touching its unifying aspect beyond light and dark, beyond thought or words. He'd come back alive after it but spent the rest of his life trying to regain that perfect union. That desire had helped lead to his downfall.

She looked down at the hands she'd folded in her lap. They were small things, wrinkled and frail. She's used those hands to shove a lightsaber through Jacen's heart and used them to bury that same lightsaber in the deserts of Tatooine as two suns rose in front of her.



She'd used them to caress Jagged's face, ruffle Arlen's hair, clutch Kol's even-smaller hand. Her hands told the story of a life, and once the hands and body were gone she didn't know how much of the life would truly remain.

As she watched the last hints of sunrise fade into dim gray, she asked Sekot, "This isn't a very Jedi thought, but are you ever... afraid of what comes next?"

Those young and ancient eyes held hers and she felt she was seeing just a little of the planet's incomprehensible soul. "Of course," it said. "Every life fears its end."

The raw honesty in that admission made her looked away. She tried to think of something to say, but when she glanced back at the spot beside her it was empty. The living world, still all around her, had drawn its attention elsewhere.

She looked back at the cloudy sky and decided to stay for a while and watch. After as long a life as hers, after all she'd done, it felt good to have no place to be.

Just when he thought he was in the clear a branch came out of nowhere and smacked Kol Skywalker in the face. He fell back and landed butt-first in the dirt, and before he could get back up he heard a voice call through the undergrowth ahead, "Have you fallen behind, *Jeedai*?"

Kol planted both palms in the ground and shoved himself upright. "No, I'm good."

He lowered his head and charged forward again. Since coming to Zomana Sekot he'd become an expert in the wild terrain that surrounded the Middle Distance. He knew the parts that were old forests full of spaced-out, thick-trunked bora trees. He knew where the tall-grass fields were and the few scattered lakes. He knew how the hills rose and fell and he knew the patches of young growth where the boras were smaller and surrounded by dense brush and long-leafed ferns. The last kind of terrain was the most difficult to get through, even for an intrepid for an eleven-year-old boy, and he couldn't figure out why his friend was so determined to lead him here.

The brush kept obscuring his view and he was surprised when the ground fell into a slope beneath him. He held both hands in front of his face as momentum carried him forward, tipped his body back and tried not to fall, and finally made it to the bottom of the slope. When he lowered his hands he looked around in all directions. He was in a crevasse of some kind, hidden from the morning sun by shadows from the opposite wall. When he turned his gaze from the steep slopes and towering trees he finally spotted his companion. The Yuuzhan Vong girl, chalk-white face yet unmarked by tattoos and long black hair pulled up into a topknot, stood with hands impatiently planted on her hips.

"I knew you would get here eventually, *Jeedai*," she said with just the hint of a smile.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Nei Rin," Kol said. "So what are we *doing* here?"

"I have something special to show you. Come." She waved a beckoning hand and slipped into the brush that clogged the bottom of the crevasse. Kol fought a sigh, threw up hands to shield his face, and followed her. She wasn't hurrying this time, wasn't challenging him to see if he could keep up with her. When he cleared the dense patch he found her on the other side, standing in front of a small grotto. Subterranean water seeped through cracks in the bare vertical rock-face and trickled down into a patch of soil left in shadow. Kol's eyes took a moment to adjust to the dimness; then he saw the half-dozen meter-long stalks rising from the dirt. Instead of the green skin of plants or the bark of trees, these stalks had a red scaly surface and their visible tips ended with snouts and fine-toothed jaws. Kol had seen amphistaff groves before, in the zones set aside for Yuuzhan Vong shapers, but he'd never expected to find one here.

The young amphistaffs twitched, restless and alive, as Nei Rin stepped among them. She ran a hand out and caressed the head of the nearest creature. Though she was only Kol's age, a few long tool-tipped fingers had already been grafted to her hand, marking her as a member of the race's shaper caste. As young as she was, she was already learning to breed new creatures.

"Well, *Jeedai*," she asked Kol, "What do you think?"

"You made these all by yourself?"

"Of course. Come closer."

Kol didn't budge. Amphistaffs were bred to be recognize Yuuzhan Vong as their masters and be aggressive to all other species. Older amphistaffs could be trained to accept human masters, but young ones in their groves instinctively lashed out at the unfamiliar.

"Come, Kol." Nei Rin extended a hand. "You will be safe. I promise you."

"Did you... do something with these? Modify their genes or something to make them docile?"

"They are not docile. They are merely accepting. Please, trust me."

Kol was not excited about being a lab ranat in an especially dangerous science project, but he knew Nei Rin had a natural gift for shaping the same way he had a natural touch with the Force. He took a few steps forward and the amphistaffs didn't snap at him. He reached and took her hand. She drew him forward, fully into the grove. Young amphistaffs trembled a little at his proximity but none of them lashed out to attack with their poisoned jaws.

"Whew!" Kol breathed out. "This is... this is *amazing* Nei Rin! How did you do this? No, never mind, I wouldn't understand if you told me."

"It has been my project for many months." She kept holding Kol's hand and used the other to pet an amphistaff's head. "I'm glad it succeeded."

"Yeah, I'm pretty overjoyed they're not biting me to pieces," he said, though he wasn't confident enough to try and touch one of the things. "Have you showed this to anyone else?"

"No. It has been my well-hidden secret until now."

"Really? You mean you haven't told any of the shapers?"

"I have asked them for tools and advice. They indulge me." She stroked the underside of the amphistaff's jaw. "This is good, isn't it? They say too many people still fear the Yuuzhan Vong. Some day I wish..."

"It'll be different one day." He gave her hand a short squeeze.

"Once we earn their trust and prove we are no longer a threat," she said, almost wistful.

It was a fine dream to have. Scars from the Yuuzhan Vong invasion seventy years ago were still fresh for many beings. The mess embroiling her brother Nat on Arquilla was a good example. Kol had never met any of Nei Rin's people before coming to Zonama Sekot and at first he'd been skeptical and scared, but he saw now the new society the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong had built together. It was something he wished he could share with all the beings across the galaxy who trusted neither.

A thought occurred to him. "Don't we have lessons today?"

Nei Rin looked up at the sun. "Not for an hour or more."

"Yeah, and how long is it going to take us to get there from here? We don't want to be late."

"Your point is taken, *Jeedai*." She withdrew her hand from his. "We shouldn't keep her waiting."

Getting out of the ravine was no easy task. They had to crawl up on their hands and feet, and once they got to level ground they got lost twice trying to find the path that would take them to the lake where their teacher held daily lessons. By the time they stumbled in, dirty and sweating, the rest of the group was already assembled: just under twenty children, half Yuuzhan Vong and half Jedi. The halves mixed freely as the students took their places, sitting on round flat stones arranged in a semi-circle around one large boulder at the edge of the lake.

Sitting with her back to the water was their teacher. Tahiri Veila was a small and shrunken figure like Kol's great aunt. As she sat cross-legged on the boulder a gray cloak stitched from animal skin hid her form, revealing only a face framed by twin sheets of long white hair. Against the lines and wrinkled on that face they could all make out the three scars on her forehead left long-ago by Yuuzhan Vong shapers who had cut open her mind and attempted to turn a Jedi apprentice into one of them.

Most of the young Jedi here had some personal connection to the Yuuzhan Vong war. Among them were a Tynnan and an

Ithorian who'd grown up on foreign planets after Yuuzhan Vong bioweapons ravaged their homeworlds. Kol's connection wasn't nearly so personal, though he'd heard plenty of stories about the conflict from his great aunt Jaina before coming here.

Master Veila gathered them to tell them more. She spoke today like she always did, in thoughtful measured tones. She recounted a little bit about the war and more about the long efforts to build a society on Zonama Sekot. When the lesson finished and the students began to scatter, Master Veila gestured for Kol and Nei Rin to come join her. They stood in front of her boulder and though the old woman was barely bigger than Kol she managed to fix him an intimidating stare from her high perch.

"You two arrived in an interesting state," she said. "I hope you didn't have problems getting here."

"Not at all, Master Kwaad," said Nei Rin. Tahiri preferred her Yuuzhan Vong students refer to her by the name of the mind implanted by the shapers, the mind that had reached a curious coexistence with its Jedi counterpart and become a strange precursor to the future of both Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong.

"You look like you've been crawling through the dirt." She cast an up-down look over Kol. He awkwardly tried to brush away the dark stains on his trousers.

"We just did some exploring," he told her, and immediately regretted it. As a Yuuzhan Vong, invisible in the Force, Nei Rin might have been able to get away with lying to Master Veila, but for Kol it was a lost cause.

To his surprise, the old woman's stern expression relaxed into a smile. "You wouldn't have been exploring a certain shady grotto with a new amphistaff grove, would you?"

"How did you-" Nei Rin stopped and picked up her jaw. "I am sorry, Master Kwaad. My intent was not deception."

"What was it then?" She sounded curious.

"I have been trying to develop amphistaff that do not react with hostility to humans."

"And you brought Kol along to test your hypothesis?"

"Yes, Master."

She got stern again. "That's very dangerous. Your project is ambitious and admirable but if it had gone wrong you could have *killed* Kol."

Kol had thought the same thing but he'd stepped into the grove anyway. "It's all right, Master Veila, I—"

"Kol, please," she said sternly. "Just because your brother is off risking his life doesn't mean you have to."

Kol looked down at his feet, sullen. Nat was four years older and four years meant a lot at their age. He was with Uncle Arlen, actively doing things to try and fix the problems on Arquilla. Kol liked being on Zonama Sekot more than barren Ossus. He liked being with Nei Rin, Jaina, and Tahiri, but he still wished he could be out there like Nat, doing Jedi things instead of just learning how.

"What you two are doing is good," Tahiri said, tone softened again. "But remember what you are. You'll be a Jedi one day, Kol, and Nei Rin, you'll be a fine shaper, but that day is in the future. Step beyond your boundaries and you'll be a danger to people without meaning it. For now, you are students and I'm your teacher."

"We understand, Master Kwaad. I will inform the shapers of my discoveries and let them proceed."

"I'm glad. And don't do anything like this without telling your seniors. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Kwaad."

"Kol?"

"Yes, Master Veila."

Her expression relaxed one last time, and Kol felt a brush of fondness through the Force. When she smiled it was faint, but it creased the sides of her face and wrinkled the three scars on her forehead.

"I'm glad I've made *that* lesson clear. What you two are doing should be done. Just be sure to do it right. Together you give me hope for the future in ways you can never know."

The Yuuzhan Vong had been settled on Zonama Sekot for seventy years and created whole new generations who knew nothing of the

devastating war their grandparents had wrought. A society could change a lot in two generations and so could a city. Other times they didn't change enough. When Jaina heard the news about Arquilla and how Arlen was involved, she wondered if the people of Alliance who'd been uprooted from their homes by the Yuuzhan Vong would every truly adapt. In comparison the Yuuzhan Vong themselves had made greater strides.

"It's easier for them here," Tahiri told her over afternoon tea. "Zonama is a controlled environment, literally, and they're isolated from the complications of larger galactic politics."

Meeting with her old friend every day had become a staple of Jaina's life here. The two of them had been through so much together, good and terrible, but these conversations were always slow and relaxed, shadowed by the past but not weighted by them.

"Isolation isn't a bad thing," Jaina said. "Not for the Yuuzhan Vong."

"I agree. There's still a lot of people out there who'd do them harm if they could."

For that reason the location of Zonama Sekot was kept a careful secret by the Jedi Order. They acted as custodians of the planet and liaisons between the exiled Yuuzhan Vong and the Galactic Alliance. Sometimes that helped build trust between all three parties; other times it weakened it. Things were in flux now, but there was at least some good news of late.

"Word came down from Mrlsst today," Jaina said. "Their research team just set out. They'll rendezvous with our people in two days and should be on Zonama in three."

"I'll be glad to have them," said Tahiri. "I know Neshri Yim will be too."

Cooperation with the Alliance was often tentative, but over the past few months Jaina and the Yuuzhan Vong Master Shaper had negotiated with a team of research xenobiologists and cleared the way for them to come to Zonama and assist in the decades-long process of restoring the ecosystem on the planet's southern hemisphere. Zonama Sekot's first encounter with its children a decade before the Clone Wars had left massive swathes of its lower

continents uninhabitable. Since their exile the Yuuzhan Vong had worked hard at restoring that ravaged land to limited success, and their shapers and the Jedi had both agreed that outside expertise was needed.

They'd carefully screened the lead researchers from the university on Mrlsst and, as an extra safety precaution, the team was set to rendezvous with a Jedi shuttle at Esfandia and travel from there to Zonama Sekot's secret location. It was the kind of politically-neutral collaboration that everyone stood to gain from, and Jaina hoped the researchers could accelerate the healing of the southern wastes.

"Do you plan to stay with the researchers once they arrive?" Tahiri asked after taking a sip of tea.

"For the beginning, at least. What about you?"

"For the beginning. I was wondering if you wanted to take anyone *else* down there."

"Like who?" Jaina asked, though she already knew.

"Well," sighed Tahiri, "I found out that this morning a certain young Jedi was shown a science project by a certain young shaper."

She didn't the sound of that. "What kind of science project?"

"It seems Nei Rin has been breeding amphistaffs in a secret grove. She'd been trying to train them not to attack humans and needed to test her work."

Jaina slumped in her chair and breathed deeply. That Kol wasn't dead meant Nei Rin's project was a success. That the test had happened at all meant her great-nephew was dangerously stupid or dangerously brave, or maybe both.

"I'll have a talk with him," Jaina said.

"I already did, but it would mean even more coming from you." Tahiri blew a little steam from her tea. "It's a little nostalgic, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Running out into the forest without adult supervision, finding strange and dangerous creatures, risking your neck."

If anything Yavin 4 had possessed more dangerous fauna than Zonama Sekot, from ancient Sith-bred monsters to marooned



Imperial pilots. Tahiri, Jaina, Anakin and Jacen and the rest had all taken lots of brave, stupid risks exploring the jungles around the Jedi Academy. It had been mostly exciting then and looking back after a lifetime it filled her with the warm glow of golden memories. But as an old woman entrusted with the care of Ben Skywalker's grandson, the thought of Kol doing the same appalled her.

Tahiri saw all that on her face and smiled softly. "I also talked with Neshri Yim. He's decided to reward Nei Rin's initiative and take her down south so she can see what real research and innovation look like."

"Kol's going to be lonely without his playmate."

"Will he?"

She sighed again. She was glad, very glad, that the boy had become close with the young shaper. That kind of friendship between humans and Yuuzhan Vong, earnest and devoid of history's baggage, was all too rare. But Kol was also a Skywalker, and that name carried weight of its own, and he was already trying hard to live up to it. Trying too hard, taking brave and stupid risks.

"I think he should come for a little while," Tahiri said bluntly. "He can see what real research looks like. And he can be supervised by adults at all times."

She raised good points. Jaina also knew that, if they forced Kol to stay in the Middle Distance while his friend went away, he'd feel left-out and resentful. This was a learning experience for him in more ways than one, and if destiny would demand as much of Kol as it had from Luke, Ben, or Jade, it was best to learn things early.

"Adult supervision." Jaina wagged a finger at Tahiri. "That's the key."

"I think so too," Tahiri smiled again and sipped a little more.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Over the past few days on Arquilla, Arlen and Nat had both grown increasingly restless. Jade's sudden and barely-explained departure left her son quietly anxious. Arlen had already been concerned about his daughter, who hadn't sent word since receiving his initial request to help. They were in no position to settle things between the planet's fighting factions and even Chance had turned over the fate of his Arquilla operations to a team of engineers and legal assessors who'd flown in from Coruscant. When the update finally came in from Marin it sent everything into motion.

She said she was on Lantilles right now, less than six hours Coreward from Arquilla, but Arlen resisted the urge to fire up *Starlight Champion's* engines and join her. They'd been brought onto this mission by Chance, after all, and he deserved to know what Marin had found. So did the Alliance for that matter, which was why Arlen planned on messaging Allana with the information too.

Before he could patch in that call, though, Chance said he needed to hail his business partner on Coruscant and, to Arlen's slight surprise, insisted the Jedi be in on the call. Arlen grabbed Nat

too, and both of them hovered over Chance as he sat in *Champion's* co-pilot seat and patched in the connection.

It had been almost a decade since Arlen had seen Volgma, but Hutts aged slower than humans and if he's grown any more corpulent, Arlen couldn't tell from the holo-image.

"It sounds like this will end the shipments to Arquilla," Volgma said once Chance had relayed everything. Most Hutts thought it was beneath their dignity to speak Basic but this one was an exception. "That is good news, but I am not sure what good it will do for *us*."

"The surveyors have a pretty grim assessment," Chance said. "The refinery's pretty much beyond salvage. We're going to have to tear the entire thing down, which is going to cost money, and if we want to build a *new* installation—"

"It is too much," Volgma flapped a small hand. "We'll have to cut our losses, great as they are. According to the Alliance officials I've spoken with we may receive *some* compensation from the government... depending on the settlement struck on Arquilla."

"Right now there's now there's not even negotiations going down, let alone a settlement," Arlen put in. "Duros and Tynnan factions are attacking each other more freely and we're seeing plenty of imported weapons. There's no way to know whether taking out that Lantilles storehouse is going to end the flow or not, which is why I'm going to go meet with Marin and investigate further."

He made no mention of the Imperial Knights who'd also shown up at Lantilles. If they were pursuing criminal allies of Veers that was their prerogative, and he hoped they could work together. It had been a long time since he'd seen his nephews and he was curious to see how strong Vitor and Roan had grown in the Force—and if their teaching stayed as true to the Light Side as their mother had promised it would.

Investigating Hutt criminal syndicates was neither easy nor safe, and Arlen frankly ached to ask if Volgma knew anything that could help them. He knew from experience that the Hutt took great offense if anyone even implied he had criminal connections, but

after all this time he still wasn't clear how Volgma had ended up a legitimate business-being on Coruscant. He only knew that he'd been one for about a century, which wasn't so long in Hutt terms.

Chance, though, was willing to take the plunge. "I've got to ask, Volgma. How do the Vosadii relate to the other Hutt clans nowadays?"

Volgma made a rumbling sound. "They are... newly eager."

"Sounds like people who'd want to cash in on Arquilla. New leadership?"

"I believe their current kajidic is Soergg Vosadii Bezhin. He has been active for, oh, three standard centuries, but I've never known him to be so bold before."

"Do you know Soergg?" asked Nat.

Arlen fought a wince and awaited an angry denial, but instead Volgma said, "We have met, long ago. But mostly I have heard of his activities."

"What kind of relationship do the Vosadii have with the Anjiliac?" asked Chance.

"It has never been good," Volgma said, almost reluctantly. "I believe Soergg and Vedo Anjiliac have an especially... poor relationship."

"You *believe*?" Nat repeated. "Where are you hearing this from?"

"Don't mind my apprentice, Volgma," Arlen bleated. "He's just curious. He doesn't really understand."

"Volgma," Chance said seriously, "If you can help them out with this it will help *us* too. We might even be able to recoup some losses if the Alliance had someone they can hold responsible for the weapon shipments."

"What are you expecting?" huffed Volgma. "Do you think you can somehow place Soergg in a jail cell on Coruscant for what he's done? Even the Empire never imprisoned a kajidic. No Hutt would ever betray another Hutt to outside authorities. It's unthinkable."

"We're not even working with the Alliance right now," Arlen reminded. "We just want to get to the source of this. If we can strike some kind of deal, so much the better. Stopping the shipments is the first step toward peace on Arquilla and the sooner peace comes

the more likely your company is to get some reparations for what you've lost."

Volgma made another deep noise that sounded like a growl, and his eyes narrowed as he stared at Arlen. If he'd been speaking to the giant Hutt in-person he'd have been scared.

Then Volgma released a sigh that sounded loud enough to rattle a room. "Can you beings meet me in the Da Soocha system in four days?"

Arlen didn't understand. Da Soocha was deep inside Hutt Space but his grandparents had used it as a Rebel Alliance base nearly a century ago. What was there now, he didn't know.

Chance, though, seemed to get it. "I think we can handle that. Arlen, this bucket of bolts is ready to fly, right?"

"Yeah, getting there won't be a problem." He looked at Volgma's holo. "It would be nice if I knew what to expect."

"Tell your spawn to get every bit of information she can from that storehouse's computer system. She'll be delivering it to the Anjiliac. What happens next.... We shall see. Four days, remember."

"Absolutely," said Chance.

"Then I will make sure they're expecting you. You *are* still flying the same ship, aren't you, Jedi Fel?"

"It's my one and only."

"Then everything will be arranged for you. Make sure you are ready. Good day."

The holo shut off abruptly. Neither Arlen nor Nat could keep from staring at Chance, who spun his chair to face them and gave an awkward shrug.

"So I guess you might as well know," he said. "Volgma is Vedo Anjiliac's nephew."

"Huh," Arlen grunted. "So if Vedo is Anjiliac.... But *is* he Anjiliac? I mean, you keep on telling me he's totally gone straight-"

"And he has."

"-But if he *is* totally legitimate now, does that mean he's still Anjiliac? Part of the family even if he's not with the syndicate?"

"Arlen, I've just told you all I know. The only ones who can explain Hutt politics are Hutts. They don't like to air their dirty

laundry with outsiders." He paused. "Metaphorical laundry, obviously."

"Obviously." Arlen looked to his apprentice. "Well. It looks like we're going to Hutt Space. Are you game for that?"

"Of course." The young man's expression looked bright after days of worrying about his mother. "And we'll be meeting Marin too, right?"

"She's got the goods, so we'd better be." As Nat smiled he added, "It sounds like we're going to be teaming up with your cousins Roan and Vitor too."

"That's the part I don't like," said Chance. "In fact, I'm not even sure they *should* come with us."

"Chance, this is important. Marin said they're after the people who helped Veers bomb that skyhook. Frankly, that's even bigger than Arquilla."

"The Hutts are not going to like dealing with Imperials. That's why I didn't mention it to Volgma."

"If the Anjiliac aren't involved, they have nothing to fear from Vitor and Roan. Besides, Imperial Knights have special skills and resources none of us do. Their father's the Emperor, for kark's sake."

"Also your brother," Chance added.

"Yeah, well.... Brotherly stuff was a long time ago. The point is, we need them with us."

He sighed, shrugged. "Okay, fine. Who am I to refuse a couple Imperial princes?"

"That's the spirit." Arlen patted his shoulder. "Now let me use the comm. I've got to tell Marin what the game plan is."

By the time Marin got instructions from her father, Sherev'ath's mercenaries had already moved in with a big Damorian hauler that locked ports with the storehouse and began loading crate and craft of heavy merchandise. The Mandalorians had already selected their preferred spoils- mostly weapons, to nobody's surprise. Marin coupled her X-wing to the *Bottom Line* and joined her family aboard. The Imperials had retreated to their ship; Vitor remained

distant but when she relayed Arlen's instructions he said he would be there at Da Soocha.

Despite the awkwardness she was glad to have four Imperial Knights on this mission, especially since the Skiratas were taking their spoils back to Mandalore. They were all pleased with the mission's outcome, but that didn't make Marin any happier to say goodbye.

"I always told people having a *jeti* in the family would come in handy," Ninet said as she watched Marin check her kit before returning to her X-wing.

"Always?" Marin raised a brow.

"Most of the time," Ninet shrugged. "I needed to figure out what to make of you first."

Marin knew that feeling. Until she was fourteen she'd only known the Mandalorian half of her family existed in the abstract. Back then she'd been an apprentice Jedi on Bastion, with Vitor and Roan, and had assumed her future lay there. Ninet and her father had felt alien and even threatening at first but she barely remembered that now. Maybe it was possible to straddle the two halves of her life evenly; maybe this reunion with Vitor would bring revelations, but for now she knew with whom she felt more comfortable.

Marin closed her kit and looked over her flight suit before swinging the pack over her back. "Do you know what you'll do with the merchandise when you get back to Mandalore?"

"Well, we've got plenty of options. This ship couldn't get any more full," Ninet said as they started making their way through the halls. *Bottom Line* was a ragged but cared-for ship, and it reminded her a little of her father's. Mekr's ship had far more cargo space, both obvious and hidden, and all of them were as stuffed as could be.

"You've got enough guns and equipment for a small army here," Marin told her. "You must know people you can fence this to."

"I'm sure Mekr does. And Jovar's got more contacts than anybody."

"Yeah," she admitted, "His lead helped get us here."

Ninet glanced at her sidelong but said nothing. She knew what Jovar Skirata could have been. What he refused to be was what Marin was, more or less, and she doubted she would ever feel comfortable around him, even if he was family.

Marin had already said goodbyes to everyone else, but her mother was waiting for her by the airlock. Ninet knew when to give them privacy and drew Marin in for a short, hard hug.

*"Re'turcye mhi, Mar'ika,"* she patted her cousin on the back.

*"Re'turcye mhi, ner vod,"* Marin returned.

Ninet slipped away, leaving Marin and her mother alone in the corridor. Tamar had been pensive since even before the storehouse raid, which took Marin aback. She never acted this reserved during visits to Mandalore.

Marin tried a confident, crooked grin, the kind her dad claimed she'd gotten from *his* grandfather. "I'd offer to let you come along, but my X-wing doesn't have room for passengers."

"I know. Did your father say who else you'd be meeting at Da Soocha?"

"The Imperial Knights, him, Nat, Chance, and apparently some Hutts. I think they're members of a clan that rivals the Vosadii."

"You don't want to get more tangled up in Hutt business than necessary. There's a reason Mandos don't take contracts from them."

"Did you ever work for any when you were free-range?"

Tamar shook her head firmly. "No. That's what I'm telling you. They're always playing you for something and they're always smarter than they look."

"I understand. I'll be careful."

"You don't want word to get out that you helped knock over that storehouse either. Or that *we* did."

"Are you telling me Dorn and Mekr *aren't* going to start bragging about what they did in ever tapcaf on Mandalore?"

"They know how to brag and they know how much to tell- and *not* to tell. None of us want to make enemies of the Hutts. None of us can afford to."



She didn't understand why Tamar was so grim, especially after a successful job. It jarred with the typical boldness she'd admired in her mother. Still, she saw the point. According to Ninet, the Skiratas didn't tell other Mandos about their Jedi cousin. Marin's existence wasn't unknown outside the family but the extent to which she worked with them was. Clan Skirata may have returned to grace after the old *Mand'alor*'s death, but Clan Auchs was still out there too. They'd never taken out any revenge killings for Gevern's death, even though Mando custom almost expected it. That they hadn't was seen as a black mark against the family. If they ever did learn who'd killed their *Mand'alor* they'd be sure to act.

"I'll be careful, Mom, don't worry," Marin said. "I'll have Dad right alongside me. That's got to count for a lot, right?"

"I'd hope so," Tamar admitted.

"And he'll have Nat. Plus there'll be Vitor and Roan."

"What do you make of them?"

"You mean do I trust them? Of course I trust them."

"That's good, but they're not the Vitor and Roan you knew. Priorities change. People change."

"Do they change *that* much, though?" Marin eyed her mother. Tamar had been a Mando until she couldn't; she'd tried to be other things but she'd ended up back where she'd started and didn't, as far as Marin could tell, seem to mind the fact.

"I'm just glad you're not taking on a Hutt cartel on your own," she said finally.

"You're not the only one."

Marin spread her arms. Tamar squeezed her, even tighter than Ninet. They stepped apart; Marin caught her mother's eyes and nodded once. Then she turned, ducked through the airlock portal, and didn't look back.

The Imperial Knights had returned to the freighter they'd left docked aboard the station, a copy of the storehouse computer records in hand, and prepared for departure. There were a dozen things Vitor knew he should be doing to prepare but as he stood in

the refresher unit, staring at his reflection in the mirror, he couldn't find the will to do any of them.

Things had crystalized inside him since meeting Marin. The encounter had brought clarity to his dream and forced him to accept that there was no mistake in it, and no escape. That red blade has passed through his heart, would pass through it. He was already dead; it was just a matter of time.

As he stared into his own eyes he tried to remember how far in advance his visions usually came. The dream of the base on Ansion had come only a day before. Others, he remembered, had been longer, but usually not by much. One, he recalled, had been over a week in advance. But there was no way to tell.

His whole body shook and he grasped the sides of the sink for stead. He squeezed the cold metal hard and still couldn't look away from his face. He took it in: the darkness of his eyes, the way hair naturally parted toward the right side, the day's worth of dark stubble that didn't hide the tiny scar on the bottom-right side of his cheek, left by a stormtrooper's knife three years ago. All the things he knew so well and took for granted, like getting up in the morning and going to sleep at night.

All those things would be erased soon: eyes, hair, stubble and scar, morning and waking. All he'd been would be nothing at all but until then they'd continue, for one day or a week or a month. He didn't want to live another month knowing he would die, knowing Marin would look on as a red lightsaber speared his chest. He'd never be able to sleep like that, afraid of every sunrise because each one might be his last.

It wasn't fair. He wished he'd never had the damned Force-vision, any of the damned visions. They'd saved lives before but they weren't worth this. The Force was supposed to be a blessing, not a curse. He lifted his left hand off the metal, balled it into a fist, and pounded the sink. Pain shot through his arm but not enough. He slammed it down again. The side of his smallest knuckle cracked against the hard surface, leaking blood. Pain shot through his hand and up his arm. It was a good kind of pain, visceral and direct. It

took his mind off the dread. He kept his fist balled and raised it again.

"Vitor?" a voice called from outside. "Are you okay in there?"

Both hands fell shaking to his side. Vitor stared at his reflection, heard Treis repeated his name, and after steadying himself with a few deep breaths he said, "Yes, I'll be out in a minute."

"We got a hail from Marin. She's in her X-wing and ready her jump."

"I'll be right out," he said, and waited until he felt Treis drift away to slap a bandage on his knuckle and open the door.

It was stupid, letting himself go like that. There were three other Knights on this ship, including his cousin and his brother. They'd surely felt his agony just then, without understanding. He needed to restrain himself. He needed to focus. Their lives and many more depended on him. He had to remember that, and try to forget, even though he'd fail.

When he got to the cockpit the rest of them were there. Roan was in the pilot's seat, Mohrgan beside him, and Treis hung off the back of the prince's chair. Roan twisted in his chair to look back and passed wordless concern with the Force. Vitor brushed him away as gently as he could and turned his focus ahead.

They'd relocated their ships past the outer edge of Lantilles' orbit and through the viewport all they could see was the Mandalorian's freighter and, drifting close but detached, a single old X-wing fighter with a red-and-black checkerboard pattern down the nose.

"Are we ready?" he asked.

"We've plotted a course to Da Soocha," said Roan.

Mohrgan looked out at the X-wing. "It's a couple days' ride. She's going to be cramped in that little thing."

If that was an unspoken offer to take Marin aboard, Vitor ignored it. He didn't think he could deal with her right now, and he had a feeling she'd also prefer some privacy before they reached Da Soocha.

"Hail the ship," he said. "Let's see if she's good."

Mohrgan tapped the communication unit alive. Unsurprisingly, the link was audio-only. Marin said, "I've warmed my hyperdrives and plotted a course. I'm ready when you are."

"We're ready also," Vitor said. He felt her then, reaching with the Force across all that distance. He instinctively shirked from her mental touch.

"Okay," Marin said, a little hurt. "I'm heading out in ten. We'll see who gets to Da Soocha first."

"We'll see you there," Vitor said, and signaled Mohrgan to close the link.

Roan was staring up at him; Vitor told him to jump when ready. Their freighter adjusted pitch to point its nose at the proper star, the first of the series of jumps that would take them to a part of the galaxy none of them had ever expected to go. In the distance Marin adjusted heading as well. Roan pulled the lever and their ship surged forward in a blur of starlight.

Tamar watched the freighter and the X-wing flash into hyperspace in perfect sync. It was a good omen, she hoped, but she wasn't willing to count on that. The ominous feeling she'd had since before reaching Lantilles hadn't gone away. At first she'd thought it was some perfectly-justified maternal anxiety, but now she was starting to worry the Force might be nagging her. She hadn't sworn off the Force totally like Jovar, but she'd used it less and less since returning to Mandalore. Maybe it was trying to reassert itself in her now, or maybe it really was just mother's anxiety.

Talking to Arlen wasn't normally a way she soothed herself, but once Marin was gone she squeezed herself into the closet that was the *Bottom Line's* auxiliary comm station and hailed *Starlight Champion*. She felt Mekk's ship shudder slightly as it entered hyperspace, and two seconds later Arlen's shrunken holo-image appeared in front of her.

"I can't say I was expected you to call," he began.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "It's good to see you too. I heard you're going on a joyride to Hutt Space."

"Word's getting around."

"Marin told you she brought in Mando help to knock over an illegal Hutt storehouse, right?"

"After the fact, yes," Arlen said seriously. "She says she let you keep spoils as payment for services rendered."

"Not very Jedi behavior, is it?"

"Well. She's not a typical Jedi. Never could be, considering she's been torn in three directions all her life."

"Only one of those is my fault."

"I'm not blaming you. I'm not blaming anything. I just...." He shook his head. "It's good I'll be with her now. I can keep an eye on things."

"Arlen, did she tell you what *else* happened at the storehouse?"

"You mean my nephews showing up?"

"Okay, what *else* else?"

"Now you're getting me confused."

"There was way more in that storehouse than we can haul back to Mandalore. The rest went to Marin's *other* helpers. Big crew of mercs from Broken Moon."

Arlen winced. "She didn't mention she'd gone to Sherev'ath."

"I didn't think she had. They're still loading up now. That's a *lot* of weapons and equipment and there's no telling who it'll be going to."

Arlen sighed and looked away. After a few pensive seconds he said, "It probably won't be going to Arquilla. That's a start."

"Not exactly the Jedi response to criminal arms deals."

"Yeah, well, your concern isn't very Mando either."

"My concern isn't about the guns. When it comes to violence there's always going to be buyers and sellers. Always. I'm concerned about Marin."

"I am too. I'll talk to her about this when we meet."

"Good. Thank you."

"Well, thank *you* for telling me. You didn't have to."

"Yes. I did."

He took that with a nod. There didn't seem to be anything else to say. It had been a while since they'd talked and it had been even longer since they'd talked about something besides Marin.

"Was this your first mission in a while?" he asked, "Or do you still get off Mandalore a lot?"

"Do *you* stay on Ossus all the time?"

"Point taken. I'm just saying- in the nicest way possible- that running and gunning all the time is best left to people a little younger."

"Doesn't slow down Dorn or Mekk. Or *you*, Jedi."

"Listen, I know my limits."

"Really? Before I left Mandalore I saw a news broadcast about some Jedi who jumped onto a moving airspeeder to stop some attack on Arquilla...."

"That was an extraordinary circumstance," he protested. She couldn't help but smile.

People changed if they went through a lot, especially if they were young when changed happened, but as you got older it got more and more like Marin said. There was a core that remained. Even after all these years, all the changes they'd been through, Arlen would never be the stereotypical stoic peace-and-mediation Jedi Master. And, whether she liked it or not, Tamar would never quite be a cold-hearted merciless Mando warrior either. It left them with things in common, but never enough.

"I'll take care of Marin, don't worry," Arlen said seriously.

"I know you will. 'Til next time."

"'Til next time."

She turned off the transmission and killed the blue holo, dropping the room into dimmest light. She took a few breaths, and when she decided she was ready she stepped out of the communications closet and went to join her family.

Before he stepped inside the cantina, Kaynar Auchs surveyed his surroundings one more time. The squat stone building sat the end of an unpaved lane in a town that barely deserved the name. By local standards it was a mid-sized settlement, but Barkhesh was a backwater even compared to neighboring worlds. As he gave the rest of the street another look the sun beat hard on his T-visored, faceless helmet. The few other beings walking around in muggy

midday heat- mostly human, a scattering of different aliens- gave him wide berth and careful glances. Even on a planet like this, Mandalorians drew attention. Kaynar liked those looks, true be told. He liked being respected and feared again.

He tilted his helmet just a bit to glance at the roof of the cantina. From the street all that could be seen was the transmission antennae jutting up from one corner, plus a set of solar panels and their power convertor. Satisfied, Kaynar strolled straight forward, down the lane, through the doorway, and into the cantina.

Faint natural light slanted into the cantina from slit windows, but most illumination came from the large bright holo in the center of the room. Most of the beings arrayed around the oval bar counter were looking up at the projected blitzball game, but a few sulked in in booths by the walls.

Kaynar had definitely tracked his bounty as far as Barkhesh, and according to his client, this unimpressive watering hole was one of Raga Chuvok's favorite bolt-holes. Kaynar had come prepared for multiple outcomes, which included shaking down the bar-owner and patrons or facing an entire crowd of Chuvok and his allies. When he spotted the booth in the far-right corner, occupied only by a green-skinned Aqualish with a purple scar across his bald domed head, the Mandalorian knew he'd gotten lucky.

The bounty spotted him as he moved across the room. Chuvok was on his feet but not out of the booth when Kaynar stepped in to block his path. He put one hand on his holstered blaster pistol and the other firmly on the Aqualish's shoulder.

"Let's take a walk, friend," Kaynar said.

Chuvok made a few guttural grunting sounds in his own language and tried to break free. Kaynar drew his pistol and stabbed the tip into the alien's plump gut.

"I said *walk*. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Kaynar's helmet had a three-hundred-sixty-degree viewscanner that allowed him to watch his own back, and he could see the others in the bar watching in silent attention but stuck in their seats. Chuvok seemed to realize he was trapped; he gave another grunting

noise, this one drowned-out and mournful, which Kaynar took as a sign of defeat.

He grabbed the alien roughly by the shoulders and pulled him out of the booth. Slipping his pistol to the back of Chuvok's head he shouted, "March!"

He barely saw it in his viewscreen: a second Aqualish standing in shadow at the back of the bar, drawing out his blaster. Kaynar's *beskar* could deflect small arms fire but right now he was a close-range stationary target and the shooter could slip a shot through his neck or between armor plates.

He flipped his pistol from *stun* to *kill* as he pivoted. He shot a second before the Aqualish did. His blast went true, nailing his attacker in the center of the chest and dropping him, while the shot aimed at him skipped across the top of his shoulder-pad and impacted in the wall.

Before Kaynar could turn back around, Chuvok shoved him violently away and broke for a sprint. He braced himself against the table to keep from falling, then pushed upright and ran in pursuit.

He got outside just in time to hear the tang of a single laser-shot overhead and see Chuvok go sprawling in the middle of the dusty street. Pedestrians scampered out of sight as Kaynar stalked up behind the Aqualish, pistol drawn and set back to *stun*. The Aqualish was still alive and awake but the single shot had blown out his knee. Chuvok rolled onto his back nonetheless and pulled a small blaster from his vest. Kaynar lashed out with one leg and kicked it away. He stomped down hard on the alien's hand and got another cry of pain.

With his gun still pointed at Chuvok, Kaynar looked back and saw his son Yaga lowering himself from the cantina roof, Verpine sniper rifle slung off his back. At fourteen the boy was a freshly-made adult and he could already shoot better than most Mandos two times his age.

When Yaga got close he gave his boy a swat on the back. "Good job, *ad'ika*." Now let's get him back to the ship."

Kaynar Auchs had dealt with bounties more and less cooperative, but eventually they got the merchandise onto the



*Ultimatum* and locked him in a containment cell. It had been an easy job, and it would pay pretty well, but as he prepped his ship for launch Kaynar couldn't help but feel like the victory was hollow. It had been a familiar feeling for a long time. Since his older brother Gevern's death nothing had gone right. The Auchs family had scattered and fallen from grace. Ekram Shal quietly excluded them from the best jobs and left them to earn their money hunting bounties across the galaxy or hiring their guns out extra-cheap to backwater clients who couldn't afford Shal's prices. For a time Kaynar had even had to work with non-Mando mercenary companies. It was an insult and worse, an embarrassment, because they'd allow themselves to fall so far so fast. Even in small victories like this one Kaynar felt a failure to his clan.

That had all seemed less important when Gevern had been *Mand'alor* and Kaynar had been the little brother, lost in his shadow and neglected even by his own kin. Gevern had never been an easy man to like. He'd been callus and ambitious, invoking lofty ideals of Mando honor and duty but only for his own gain. Their middle sibling, Jerkal, had tried to take his big brother's throne and gotten himself killed in the messy succession that followed Gevern's mysterious death. There were other Auchs out there, but they were all like Kaynar and Yaga, eking out a living on jobs far-flung from Mandalore.

Clan dignity and honor had never meant much back when they'd been Gevern's property, but now that Clan Auchs didn't have them Kaynar had started to feel different. He didn't know what it would take to get them back. He'd never been as ambitious or as his brothers or, truth be told, as bold a warrior, which was why Gevern had shunned him when he wasn't useful.

If they'd known what had happened to Gevern it may have been different, but after all this time it was still shrouded in mystery. They'd never even found a body. Kaynar knew what his brother had been involved in- a false-flag mission to Chiss space, designed to lure them into a war- and most assumed that his death was related, but there was no proof of anything. There was a persistent rumor that Gevern was still alive, captured and locked away in some

frozen dungeon on Csilla. If true it would shame the Auchs more than ever.

An opportunity might come one day for them to get back a little what they'd lost, but Kaynar couldn't see how it would arise. Gevern's fate- death or capture- would be a mystery, and his family would sink back into obscurity. The best he could do in the meantime was try to raise his boy right. Yaga deserved a better birthright than what his father had given him, but for now, they would do what they could.

So with their bounty safely stored away they pressed off from the dusty landing field, soared free over Barkhesh's jungles and up into space, and leaped away to meet their client. And then it would be back to Mandalore, the home that wasn't home, the home that was all they had.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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To Jade Skywalker the Hapes Cluster had, since her earliest memories, been associated with the pain of her mother's death. The very name seemed to her like ill portent. It felt strange, after almost forty years, to finally be going there herself. It was something she'd never wanted; even now she quietly dreaded the prospect of meeting Darth Terrid again and facing the Chiss who had, for a few short important months a long time ago, been one of her best friends.

Jade tried to distract herself by asking Tanith Zel question after question. She'd known the Hapan woman for a long time but never well. Where Jade had lost one parent during the Hapan secession Tanith had lost both, and though her father Zekk had been a Jedi, Tanith seemed unable to use the Force. She'd instead devoted herself to organizing the exile community on New Hapes and monitoring the events in the Consortium itself.

"The loyalists have had their base on Orelon for the past four years," Tanith explained as they sat and shared a pot of caf in the crew lounge aboard *Jade Shadow*. Jade had inherited the old SoroSuub star yacht from her father, who'd in turn gotten it from his parents, and it had been decided that the obscure and

unremarkable-looking ship would be ideal for sneaking in and out of Hapan space without gaining attention.

"Is four years a long time?" Jade asked as she sipped from her steaming mug.

"Most of their hideouts don't last more than one year without being discovered. Orelon has also been their longest for all that time."

"Is there a reason it wasn't found?"

"Orelon is a very good place to hide. It's on the outer edge of the Hapes Cluster and tucked away inside the Transitory Mists. It's a little like your old Jedi base on Shedu Maad- the only way to access it is via a narrow channel through the Mists."

"Is it inhabited?"

"The second planet is, yes. It's a small colony world, mostly used for mining. But the loyalists haven't been hiding there. They've been in Orelon VI. It's a gas giant."

"One of the moons?"

"No, they've been *in* it. A long time ago our people used to mine Orelon VI's gas to make plasma, but eventually tibanna became more practical. The planet was abandoned but the mining facility is still there. It's a huge complex that's sunken into the planet's atmosphere, but it's built to withstand all the storms and pressure inside."

"So there's a hundred thousand people living *inside* a gas giant? That's some hiding spot."

"What's left of the loyalist fleet is in the system too. They've got a few bases on Orelon VI's moons. Since the system's so close to the Mists even the sensors on Orelon II get scrambled. It's why nobody's spotted their activity all this time."

"And you're saying you want to get people *out*, all hundred thousand?"

"Getting in and out will be hard. Getting enough ships will be harder. Convincing them to leave with us might be the hardest thing of all. Our queen's taking care of the first two. We're going to do the last one."

Jade knew Allana wasn't comfortable being supposed monarch of a star cluster she hadn't been to in decades, but she held her tongue. Everything about Tanith emanated stern resolve; this was the task she'd set her life on, the task she felt had been given to her since the moment of exile and her parents' deaths. It was a heavy burden that had been with her for a long time, but Jade knew something about those.

"To be honest," she said, "I'm a little surprised you've been working with them. Who started it?"

"I did. It was tricky making first contact, and you could tell the loyalists had a lot of pride getting in the way, but in the end they realized they need any help they can get."

"Do they know you're bringing Jedi with you?"

"No. I'll tell them when we arrive."

"That should be... interesting. I guess we'll see how practical they've gotten."

Tanith nodded. "I'm not sure how much help they'll be in finding your Sith, but we'll at least talk to the witnesses from Reboam."

Jade winced inside at reference to *your* Sith. Tanith didn't know how right she was. "The main goal is arranging to get those people out of Orelon. Have you been to this base before?"

The Hapan woman shook her head. "No, but I've been on other missions inside the Consortium."

"I've never been there at all." That she was here now with Tanith, both of them risking their lives to help people they had every reason to hate, still felt unreal.

Tanith's look showed understanding. "Thank you for coming."

"No problem." Jade sipped the last bit of cooling caf.

"Where are your sons now? Ossus?"

"Kol's on Zonama Sekot. Nat's old enough to be training with Arlen Fel." Jade realized she knew next to nothing about Tanith's personal life. "Do you have children?"

"I have a son and husband on New Hapes."

"That's good. How old's your son?"

"Nine."

"He'll grow up fast." Jade pressed her palms against the smooth hard mug. "But it's good you have family. After all you've been doing here, I'd wondered if you had the time."

"I found it." Tanith looked into her drink, hesitant, and said, "In Hapan society, it was always considered... a disappointment to have sons instead of daughters."

"Well, no offense, but not everything you had on Hapes is worth preserving."

"I know. And I'm glad I have a son, and that he's growing up on *New Hapes*." Tanith's lips crinkled in a faint smile. She didn't show that often. "We've developed into a very different society than the one we fled from. Mostly for the better, I think."

"After what Serissa's been doing to the aristocracy, how much old Hapan values are left anywhere?"

"I don't know. I wish..." Her expression darkened. "I don't know what the future has for Hapes. Serissa's changed things forever and I don't know what will come after her. I'm just trying to do what I can here and now."

"That's a good goal," Jade said encouragingly. "It's what your parents would have wanted."

"I like to think so. You Jedi like to say the future's always moving, don't you?"

"That's right."

"Then let's gather the rest of your people. I'll brief them and make sure they everything they need to know. We'll worry about tomorrow once today's job is done."

In the execution of a grand design steps had to be taken carefully, one at a time. Darth Terrid understood that; he'd been building alliances over the past eight years, quietly seeking out other Sith Lords who felt as he did. The end he was seeking lay directly ahead of him now, so close he could almost see it. That was where his design differed from Darth Krayt's. In asking his One Sith to defer their personal ambitions in the name of a distant triumph, perhaps generations away, he was asking them to deny the desires that were

themselves wellspring of the Dark Side. Krayt's One Sith was a limpid, neutered order, far too like the Jedi for its own good.

Terrid held that belief deep in his heart, but he shielded his thoughts in the Force and made sure none of it showed to the Sith Lords he was gathering with now beneath the central pyramid on Shedu Maad. Beyond the high-arched vestibule in which they sat, walled off by swinging stone doors, was the chamber in which Darth Krayt slept. Terrid could feel the Dark Lord's dreaming soul on the edges of his thoughts, like a chill on the back of the neck. He was quite certain that Darth Wyyrlok called her most important meetings in this chamber because it would remind those present of the great power she represented.

Gathered with them were other senior Sith Lords: Darth Maleth, a human, whose chalk-white face was marked by vertical black tattoo-lines. Darth Kheykid, the Barabel whose red-and-black scales made him look even more ferocious. Darth Kroan, once one of the galaxy's richest businessmen, whose scarred face showed the punishment for his failures.

Terrid had come straight from Hapes, and as he explained the plan to attack Orelon he and Darth Saydel had devised, he watched the other Sith carefully for their reactions. Darth Kroan was of special interest; unlike the other three he had been adopted rather than born into the Sith, like Terrid. He'd been a great meddler in galactic affairs in his previous life and visibly rankled against the restraints put on him by Wyyrlok. That might make him a potent ally; it might also make him dangerous.

"The critical element will be dealing with the unknowns," he told them. "There's no telling how many warships the loyalists have. They may be hiding in the Mists or near one of Orelon VI's other's moons, but those aren't our concern. Darth Saydel's fleets will eliminate them. What we need is for every Sith we can spare to lead the attack on the mining station inside the gas giant."

"Another unknown," Darth Maleth said.

"It is a very old installation. The Hapans have records of its existence but Darth Saydel has found nothing else yet." Terrid spread his hands as though helpless. "We will simply have to

evaluate the station when we get close, find a way aboard, and disable its defenses so the fleet can do the rest from orbit."

This was the critical lie, the one he'd practiced telling. Hapans were meticulous record-keepers and through all her purges of the old ruling class, Darth Saydel had never touched the archives. Before he'd left Hapes, Terrid had sat down with her and reviewed the design specifications for the cloud-submerged mining facility. They'd plotted out how to split the Sith up into teams, and where to send those whom they planned to obliterate with turbolasers from orbit.

"So many unknowns," Maleth said with controlled distaste.

"We are Sith," Darth Kheykid hissed. "We do not shirk from challenges."

Terrid knew the Barabel was too loyal to Wyyrlok to ever be an ally, but he appreciated the help regardless. "We need to commit ourselves as fully as we can and *end* this long conflict. Once the loyalists are eliminated, Darth Saydel will rule supreme over all Hapes and we will be more secure than ever."

"The safety of Lord Krayt's design is our utmost goal," Darth Kroan said dryly, perhaps with sarcasm.

"We must also support our fellow Sith," Terrid said. "If we do not prove to Darth Saydel that we back her ambitions, she may not back ours."

Alarm rippled through the group. Kroan narrowed his eyes. "Has she said something to indicate this?"

"Nothing specific. I have only gotten... feelings." Terrid kept it deliberately ambiguous. Sith were not above petty rumor-mongering and he knew what was said about his relationship with Saydel. Much of it was even true. To Wyyrlok he said, "We knew that training her to be Sith carried risks and rewards. Right now we still stand to reap much. Show her our support and we'll get it in turn, and together we'll be a more formidable weapon against the Jedi than the Sith have known in generations."

"As One Sith we are here to support Darth Krayt's dream," Kheykid said. "Even a Hapan Queen is subordinate to the will of the



Dark Side. Does she understand that, Darth Terrid? Does she *really*?"

"She understands what we are and what is expected of her. She expects thing of us too, things that we promised."

"That *you* promised, as her teacher," added Maleth.

Terrid stared hard at Wyyrlok. "I left the decision in your hands. The One Sith decided to train Serissa Lohr, not me."

The Chagrian nodded. "This is true. Darth Saydel is our creation and our weapon against the Jedi. And you are correct that certain things were expected of both parties. This is our promise. We will fulfill it."

Terrid let relief show on his face, in the Force. It was honest relief, just as everything he'd said about Saydel a minute ago was honest. Avarice and ambition had been bred into her since she was young. Deep down she saw the Sith- the powers and opportunities they offered- as a means to her own ascent. Darth Krayt's vision meant nothing to her besides a temporary obstacle. Terrid was not naïve or blinded by shared passion; he knew Saydel might harbor similar disdain for him. That was why he'd made extra preparations for Orelon in case of her betrayal.

"So it's decided, then," Kroan said. "How many will actually be sent to Orelon?"

"I know Shedu Maad needs to be protected," Terrid said with a gesture to the great stone doors. "But we must also bring our best forces to bear. As you all know, even Sith can be killed by vermin. There were one thousand on Reboam and one of them killed Darth Tigran. There are said to be one hundred times that on Orelon."

"I will decide who to send," said Wyyrlok. "Naturally, our best warriors must be among them."

Terrid said, "I would like to have Darth Maleth with us as well. His skill in battle meditation would be most useful."

Maleth emanated slight displeasure in the Force but Wyyrlok said, "I understand. Lord Maleth, you will accompany the fleet."

"As you command," the other Sith said, and Terrid stifled another surge of pleasure.

Bringing Maleth to Orelon was a risk; his ability to bridge minds with the Force outstripped any other member of the One Sith. If he determined the intentions of Terrid, Inexor, or their allies it might spoil everything, but Terrid and Saydel had agreed that Maleth should be kept aboard the flagship *Black Majesty* and killed as soon as the battle began. The powerful Lord's elimination would send confusion through the rest of the Sith and make it easier to wipe them out.

"If I may be bold, Lord Wyyrlok, I would like to join this expedition," said Kroan. From the look that passed between them, Terrid gathered no explanation was needed. Kroan had long pressed for more action while Wyyrlok, as always, invoked restraint according to Darth Krayt's design.

Wyyrlok simply nodded. She'd granted him his wish this time, so Kroan, too, emanated satisfaction.

"I'm sure Darth Saydel will be most pleased by all this," said Terrid. "I will inform her."

"No." Wyyrlok rose to standing, signaling the meeting was over. "I will speak to her, and make the terms of our cooperation clear."

"Our cooperation?" The term surprised him. "Or her service?"

"The One Sith serve each other, Darth Terrid. I believe you said as much a minute ago."

"I did at that." He pushed himself to his feet. The others did too. "As always, Lord Wyyrlok, you are most wise."

After the meeting was over, after the Sith Lords had dispersed and Darth Kroan started making his way through the blue-stone corridors of the old Jedi base, Darth Terrid appeared to him. That was no surprise, even though the Chiss had shielded his presence in the Force so well Kroan barely sensed him a meter away.

"It's good you'll be coming with us to Orelon," Terrid said. "I'm sure you've been eager to use your skills to the fullest again."

Kroan eyed the Chiss and reached out with the Force. He sensed no other beings in this long dim corridor with them, but he kept his voice very low. "Why are you sure of that, Darth Terrid?"

The Chiss gave an ambiguous shrug. "It's well-known how you used to serve the One Sith. I assumed you wished to do so again."

"Battling renegade Hapan nobles isn't how I served."

"No. You found your use in... larger arenas. But this will give you a chance to be off Shedu Maad, affecting galactic affairs again. That must be encouraging, surely?"

"I won't deny it, but you should not assume too much."

"I'm sorry if I seemed impertinent. I was trying to congratulate you."

"This was your scheme, Darth Terrid. You're the one who deserves congratulations. Darth Saydel even moreso."

"Shall I pass your regards to her?"

Kroan eyed him carefully. His thoughts were shielded in the Force and nothing could be read in the glow of his eyes. "After all this is done, Darth Terrid, what do you expect to happen?"

"The Sith will control Hapes in full. We'll have a loyal army we can turn against the Jedi."

"You mean you want to see a fleet of Hapan battle dragons turn Ossus to a cinder."

"If Darth Krayt wills it," Terrid said, a hint of mocking.

"And if he doesn't?"

It was the crucial question for them both. Kroan waited, breath held, until Terrid said, "The supremacy of the Sith is what we desire. To accomplish that we must destroy the Jedi Order, but even when it's gone, some vermin will stand in our way. The power of the entire Hapes Consortium stands at our disposal, Lord Kroan. Would you turn it down?"

In what he'd said, and what he hadn't, lay everything Kroan had been looking for. All the specifics were unclear: whether Terrid would move against his enemies at Orelon or after, how they'd deal with Wyyrlok and Krayt. Another was even more important to Kroan and he needed an answer here.

"That power is most enticing, but is it yours to offer? You spoke of Darth Saydel's ambition. It's no surprise she has it. Once you give her what she wants, will she give you what *you* want?"

"You're asking me if I trust her?"

He leaned close to that inscrutable red-eyed face. "You've guessed my motivations. Let me wonder about yours. You drew Saydel into the Sith. You trained her. You guided her ambition. I'm aware of how close you've been with her, in every sense of that word."

"Go on," Terrid said flatly.

"Where did this ambition come from? Who first suggested it? Her or you?"

"You're asking which of us is leading the other. This plan is nothing without Saydel and her fleets but I am not a vehicle for her ambition. I assure you."

"And *why* are you sure?"

Terrid stared at him for one long breath, then another and another, until Kroan was near-certain the Chiss was refusing to answer. Then he said, "I killed Darth Avanc."

Kroan couldn't hide his surprise. The loyal Keshiri Lord, a close ally of Wyyrlok, had died on the mission to hunt Abeloth years ago. Terrid had been on that mission, as had Kheykid and Saydel. Kroan had never heard of whiff of suspicion about Avanc's death.

"I should tell that to Wyyrlok right now," Kroan breathed.

"If you want me to explain the rest of our discussion, go ahead."

"We've only been talking in the most vague terms."

Terrid snorted. "Be serious."

"I am. Why did you do it?"

"Avanc said Abeloth needed to be destroyed even if it meant allying with the Jedi. I said she could be a great weapon against the them. Which of us was right?"

Kroan stared at those blank red eyes with new understanding. He'd never taken Terrid seriously before, not really. His ambition seemed to outweigh his talent and he'd risen to prominence solely because he'd lucked his way into Darth Saydel's confidence. If what Terrid had said was true- and Kroan found nothing but conviction in his voice, in the Force-aura he allowed to show- then Terrid was indeed bold enough to risk everything in the name of Sith dominance.

Carefully, Darth Kroan said, "You've told me what you want. I think that desire is most... justifiable. How do you intend to *get* it?"

Terrid's face twisted into a tight smile. "I'd be happy to explain further, Lord Kroan, but can we *finally* move somewhere more private?"

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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When Korosh Vull received summons to Admiral Grave's office, he thought he knew what to expect. The attack on Bastion had been a vicious, ugly move, but that had been the whole point. Morale aboard *Nemesis* was higher than it had been in months and it seemed natural that another attack would be in order.

Vull stepped into Grave's office assuming he'd be enlisted in planning the next attack. He was surprised when the admiral, standing behind his desk and looking pensively out the viewport at Kovix-589's dark drifting asteroids, said, "General Vull, I'm sending you on a mission to Hutt space."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"You heard me." Grave turned to face him. "The attack on Bastion has riled our business partner. Soergg needs his nerves soothed. You helped negotiate our initial pact with him, so we've decided you should deal with his concerns."

"Sir, I mostly worked through intermediaries. I've only been to his palace once and that was years ago." The memory of it still made him shudder inside. Its anarchic mix of strange aliens, all presided over by a gluttonous slug, had made him yearn more than ever for life under strong Imperial rule.

"Soergg has communicated his displeasure about the use we made of his freighter."

"Part of our arrangement," Vull recalled, "Was that he not ask questions."

"The attack on Bastion put his business operations at risk. Apparently one of his major storehouses was broken into and robbed. Now he's threatening to pull out of our partnership unless we can prove we weren't involved."

"We can't prove that we *didn't* do something," Vull exhaled. That the bearers of the Empire's spirit had to beg for help from alien trash was as humiliating as having to hide in this gods-forsaken system.

"Are you refusing this assignment, General?"

"No, sir." He straightened up and kept the frustration from his voice. "I'll do what's necessary to keep Soergg happy."

"Good. You'll take along several art objects from Moff Thane's collection as gifts. They should help soothe Soergg a little."

Vull nodded and held his tongue. When they'd fled their base on Entralla they'd loaded up with its governor's considerable personal art collection, fully knowing they'd sell or trade those pieces on the black market for necessary funds. It still galled to hand precious human-made artwork over to a Hutt.

"You can assure Soergg of something else," Grave added. "For our future operations we'll be sure *not* to use his equipment."

"I'm sure that will please him greatly." Vull had to ask, "Are there future operations underway?"

"As we speak."

That was good, but Vull still felt annoyed. Even if it was through petty terrorist attacks, he still wanted to be involved in taking the fight to Fel's puppets. Instead he was stuck playing diplomat with Hutts.

"Is there a problem, General?" Grave arched a brow. "Speak now. I need to know."

"No problem at all, sir. I'll do anything so we can fight another day."

"I'm very glad to hear that," Grave said without a trace of sarcasm. "Every man in the Empire exists to serve it and there are countless ways to serve. Tomorrow you'll deal with the Hutts. The day after, we will see. But if you're itching to take the fight to the enemy, General, I suspect you'll get your chance soon enough."

Of the three disparate ships that rendezvoused over the great blue sphere of Da Soocha, only *Starlight Champion* might have drawn attention on its own. With all three of them together, Marin couldn't help but feel conspicuous.

Her well-worn X-wing, Vitor's intentionally unremarkable Corellian freighter, and her father's slant-winged Koensayr scout ship were nonetheless forced to wait in position for over an hour before being granted permission to land on Napdu, the outermost of the planet's four moons. A chain of asteroids were strung further out at the edge of the planet's orbit, remnants of a fifth moon that had served as a Rebel Alliance before being blaster apart by an Imperial superweapon. The Rebels, her great-parents included, had been on the run all the time in those days, relying on wits and craftiness to escape the Imperial war machine.

Marin had heard plenty of stories about her ancestor Han Solo, outlaw rogue turned war hero, and most of them focused on the earlier part of his life. She knew that the rogue was noteworthy because of the hero he'd become; by the same token the Rebels had made many heroes but few had backgrounds as colorful as his. He was a man who'd done many things and been many things, and in that Marin saw something not just admirable but encouraging.

The days of Han Solo and the Rebel Alliance were a long time gone. Nowadays Da Soocha was nestled firmly in Hutt Space but didn't receive much attention. The only noteworthy thing in the system was, improbably, a high-end spa and leisure facility managed by the Anjiliac clan. As the three ships waited for clearance they exchanged key information in short comm-bursts. Chance Calrissian was aboard *Champ* with Arlen and Nat; Vitor had updated his father about their mission. Volgma had come here independently and was apparently now on the moon, meeting with



his erstwhile clan-mates. Marin wasn't really sure what Chance's business partner was up to and what he had to do with the Anjiliac family's operations, since her father had always insisted Volgma was purely legitimate.

As she pondered those things she was interrupted by a fresh hail from her father. Arlen's voice buzzed intimately in her helmet headset as he asked, "Marin, are you free to talk?"

"Is there something else for me to do right now?"

"Fair enough. Marin, on the way here I spoke with your mother."

Normally she was glad when her parents were talking but she didn't like his serious tone. "What about?"

"She filled me in on everything that happened at Lantilles."

"Ah." She felt a spike of annoyance at them both.

"Marin, I'm sure you had good intentions, but I don't like all those weapons getting into Sherev'ath's hands."

"They were already in Vosadii hands. At least now they're not going to Arquilla and we know where to go next. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Like I said, I know you did what you thought was best—"

"Come on, Dad, do you think cutting a few deals is the path to the Dark Side?"

"Don't say that flippantly. We're Jedi, not mercenaries. The ends don't justify the means."

"Dad, we're about to go down and have a chat with a Hutt kajidic. If you're not ready to deal with unsavory characters, why are you here?"

"I know what we have to do and I'm not doing it lightly. Marin, do you think you'll deal with Sherev'ath again?"

"You've gone to her for help more than once. So have I. After Lantilles I say she owes me one."

"That's what I mean. You don't want to get bound close to people like that. You may have an understanding with her, you may even like her, but you'll never be able to trust her like you would a Jedi. Nothing close."

Marin pressed her lips tight. Deep down she *did* like Sherev'ath, or at least respect her. The Twi'lek had gone from a criminal's slave to a crime boss in her own right, which was no small accomplishment. In some ways it felt like she'd climbed to taller heights than Marin, who'd been born to a storied family and put on the Jedi's path before she even knew there were others.

"I can't be responsible for the good intentions of everyone I deal with," she said finally. "Maybe that's feasible on Ossus but in the Outer Rim, doing what I've been doing, it's just not. Because of that deal with Sherev'ath, Vitor might even get his trace on Veers. We might be helping to end the war in the Empire once and for all. I say we're doing good work."

She wanted to say more, to invoke the infamy and heroism both of their ancestor Han Solo, but instead her comm board lit up.

"I'm getting a new hail," she said.

"Me too," Arlen said as Marin switched the channel.

A new voice said in tinny Basic, "You have been cleared for landing at Maya Armus Spa and Resort. I repeat, you've been cleared for landing at Maya Armus. Please follow the sensor beacons to your destination."

She sent a short affirmative signal and watched as Vitor' freighter fired engines and began the descent toward Napdu. She waited for her father to call her X-wing, maybe with some last-minute parting words to close the conversation on his terms, but instead *Champion* dropped toward the moon without a hail. Marin did her best to push their talk from her mind and nudged her ship to follow.

All three spacecraft were allowed to set down together on a metal landing platform extending over a stretch of blue water. Arlen knew nothing about Da Soocha's third moon until this fly-over and its surface was pockmarked by countless lakes with round basins; perhaps volcanic, perhaps leftovers from ancient meteor storms. When he got his first whiff of the local air, so rich with sulfur it made his face twist, he decided it was clearly the former.

As he followed Chance down *Champion's* ramp he tried not to dwell on his talk with Marin. She'd been right to a degree; otherwise he wouldn't have come here. It was her confidence that disquieted. He wasn't so old he couldn't remember the certainty of the young, nor had he entirely forgotten the thrill of being out at the galaxy's edge, winning accomplishments through wit and talent far away from any other Jedi. What he disliked was her disregard for the unknown ramifications of her actions. Unintended consequences were often just as important than intended ones, if not more. Realizing that was an important part of being a Jedi, but Marin seemed willfully oblivious.

He thought he knew why. She probably wouldn't agree, but he saw a reason. When she'd killed Gevern Auchs all those years ago she hadn't even intended it. She'd been defending her mother and she'd scored a lucky hit that took the Mandalore's head off at the neck. The Mando secession war had ended surprisingly well for the Skiratas and nobody, not even Auchs' family, seemed to have traced Gevern's death back to Marin. That might have given Marin an illusion of invulnerability and, worse, an unconscious faith that acting from good intentions- like trying to save Tamar- would produce good results in the end. If he questioned her on these things she'd surely deny it, and believe her denials, but they both knew killing Auchs had been a pivotal event in her life with ramifications that ran so deep they sometimes got hard to spot.

But that was all what he was trying *not* to think about. He walked ahead of Chance and Nat as their group converged with the four Imperial Knights. It had been a long time since he'd seen Vitor and Roan and both boys had grown impressively. At seventeen Roan could grow further still but Vitor was already Marin's age. There was a lot of Davek in his face, though he'd gotten taller than either of his parents.

Once it had seemed obvious and natural that he'd guide his nephews through every step of becoming Jedi. Instead he walked across the platform and felt them examining him as deeply as he was them.

"I'm glad to have you here," Arlen said honestly. He offered a hand and both brothers shook.

"This is our cousin Mohrgan," Roan added, gesturing to the younger, darker-skinned boy behind him. "And our fellow Knight, Treis Sinde."

"Of course, I remember you both," Arlen said, because he just barely did, and in memory they'd been much, much younger. Because he didn't want to feel any older he spun on one heel and waved in the people behind him.

"My apprentice, Nat Skywalker. And this is Chance Calrissian."

"Never thought I'd meet a couple Imperial princes," Chance said warmly and shook hands with them both.

Roan and Vitor exchanged greetings with their cousin, but the other Knights were visibly more wary with Nat. Arlen understood it and felt a pang inside. Many Jedi still clung to the hope that the schism between the Jedi Order and Imperial Knights was a temporary thing. These young men, however, had been explicitly taught *not* to be Jedi, and they viewed their counterpart with caution and, it seemed to Arlen, a touch of the haughty condescension Imperials were endlessly good at.

Last to join the group was Marin, who'd delayed at her ship long enough to slip out of her flight suit. Nat brightened at the sight of her and she seemed to brighten to Nat. The fifteen-year-old was already almost as tall as her, which stood out as she patted his shoulder and asked if he was excited to be here.

"I'm excited to be helping," Nat said earnestly, then added, "Not too excited about the smell, though."

That got a few chuckles. Chance added, "If you think some sulfur lakes are bad, you should visit some *other* Hutt planets."

"How many have you been to?" asked Mohrgan.

Before he could answer the passage connecting the landing pad to the spa complex slid open. A silver-skinned protocol droid, looking slightly preposterous flanked by two green-faced Nikto in ceremonial armor, shuffled toward them.

"Welcome to Maya Armus," the droid announced in the same tinny voice that had called them to the planet's surface. "You may

call me E-3VE. I am happy to extend every hospitality from the great Vedo and his nephew Azzim. As friends of the Anjiliac you may have access to all the most enjoyable services our facility provides, including-

"We're thankful for the offer," Chance interrupted, "But if the great Vedo is available we'd really like to speak with him. My friend Volgma should be with him."

"Ah. Indeed. Follow me, please. I will make your request known to your hosts."

The group fell in behind the droid and its guards and they were led through the winding white corridors. Arlen caught brief glimpses of individual facilities through doors of artfully colored glass, including what looked like a young Hutt, only three meters long, wallowing in bubbling mud while a pair of Toydarians hovered around it and sprayed steaming water on its rough green hide.

He was pleasantly surprised not to have a long wait to meet the Hutts. The audience chamber they were led into sat beneath a round dome, and warm sunlight spilled onto the daises where a trio of Hutts lounged. Arlen immediately recognized Volgma on the far right. The one on the left seemed about Volgma's age and size and wore a black metal cap atop its head. Azzim, he guessed. The middle Hutt was older, longer and more bloated than the rest, with heavy wrinkles folding its green hide.

The protocol droid shuffled over to the big one and announced, "The illustrious Vedo is happy to honor you with his presence. You are now free to thank him."

Chance chuckled in amusement. The Imperial Knights exchanged glances that showed they'd just realized how far from the Empire they really were. Arlen held back to give Marin an opening, but when she didn't take it, he executed a short bow and said, "We're very grateful to Vedo for allowing us to come here. We know it's a rare honor and we hope this meeting can be profitable for us all. I'm also deeply indebted to Volgma for arranging this in the first place."

Vedo rumbled deeply in reply. Arlen's Huttese had gotten pretty rusty, but he was pretty sure he'd gotten the gist when the droid started translating.

"The merciful Vedo has always held that, despite his unfortunate choice to live obeying the laws of, ah, non-Hutt species," E-3VE stumbled over the slur, "Volgma never betrayed the Anjiliac. He is very glad that his faith in his nephew was well-founded and wishes to know the specifics of your offer."

"Thank you, merciful Vedo," Chance spoke up. "Now, I'm guessing Volgma already explained the basics. Our company's lost a major investment thanks to some weapons supplied to extremists on Arquilla courtesy of the Vosadii. We'd like to recoup some of our losses and were hoping you could assist us."

Instead of responding, Vedo's eyes swept across the group. They lingered on the four Imperials and Arlen wasn't surprised by the Hutt's next question.

"The perceptive Vedo notes that both sons of the Emperor Fel seem to be in attendance." The droid's voice registered surprise. "He was not informed of this and wishes an explanation."

Volgma squirmed uncomfortably on his dais but Chance responded quickly. "I'm sorry, perceptive Vedo, but these young men joined us at the last minute. These four are Imperial Knights, and they seek to hold the Vosadii responsible for abetting crimes against the Empire."

Surprise seemed to widen the old Hutt's eyes. Vedo's nephew spoke up for the first time, and E-3VE translated, "Lord Azzim wonders what crimes you specifically refer to."

Vitor stepped up beside Arlen and Chance. "We have evidence the Vosadii crime syndicate provided the ship, and possibly the explosives, used in the recent terrorist attack on Bastion. As you know, thousands of Imperial citizens were killed. Their blood demands justice."

Vedo asked a question and the droid said, "The peerless Vedo wishes to know why, if the Empire demands justice, does it not send a fleet to the Vosadii throneworld and demand it?"

Vitor thought a moment, then said, "We wish to hold the proper beings accountable, not disrespect the Hutts. We'd prefer to settle this as your kind does, by striking a deal with minimal violence."

In response the room trembled with the deep laughter of all three Hutts. The young man was out of his depth but learning fast, Arlen decided. E-3VE said, "The generous Vedo acknowledges your wisdom. He wishes to know what specifically you have in mind."

Vitor said, "What we really hope, beyond stopping the Vosadii's supply to the Restorationists, is to *use* them to track Moff Veers' supply lines and trace them to his former base."

Vedo made a deep, concerned rumbling sound. Azzim spoke next, and the droid said, "Lord Azzim appreciates your desire to negotiate with the Vosadii, but he fails to see what you have to offer."

"We were hoping *you* might have suggestions," Arlen said. "We were especially wondering if you might help us access Soergg Vosadii."

Vedo and Azzim both seemed to sink into their bloated bodies, lost in thought. Then Vedo's eyes widened and he began to speak. Listening and translating at he talked, E-3VE said, "The grandiloquent Vedo has an idea that can be of benefit for us all. The Anjiliac are not frequent visitors to Soergg's throneworld of Kor Vosadii, but we are familiar with his palace and his organization. The incomparable Vedo is specifically interested in acquiring a certain droid in Soergg's possession. This droid is a protocol model much like myself, but unlike myself is no mere translator. It has in fact served the Vosadii for many years and its personal databanks have rich information about Soergg's past and current activities. The droid is almost never outside Soergg's presence, and it is believed to be equipped with an internal self-destruct module. Its capture would be very difficult, but profitable."

Arlen took that in, and when the droid was done he asked, "I can see why *you*'d want the droid, but what does it get us?"

"Blackmail," Vitor said at once. He really did catch on quick. "He'll only get that droid back if he gets us a trace to Veers. That *could* work."

"So if *we* get the trace and Soergg gets his droid back, what do *you* get?" Arlen asked Vedo.

The Hutt ended his reply with a deep chuckle, and the droid said, "The magnificent Vedo will obtain a *copy* of the droid's memory files."

"This is... interesting," Chance said, "But none of us are droid experts. Are you going to provide one who can do all these things?"

Vedo rumbled his assent and Marin, who'd been oddly quiet until now, stepped up between Vitor and her father. "If we're going to get this droid for you, we'll need someone to get us into Soergg's palace. Are you telling me you can do that too?"

Vedo agreed again, and the droid said, "The munificent Vedo has decided to pay a visit to the Vosadii throneworld. You will accompany him."

"Just like that?" Chance asked. "I thought you guys weren't on the best terms. Won't he be suspicious?"

Azzim said that a suitable cover story needed to be concocted. Marin's brows drew together in thought. "I have an idea for that one. Tell him you know how he can get back all the merchandise stolen from him at Lantilles. Say you want to drive a hard bargain."

The Hutts shook in amusement and E-3VE said, "The prodigious Vedo approves of your idea heartily. Acting as parts of his entourage, you should be able to infiltrate the palace and kidnap his droid while he bargains with Soergg. Naturally, we will plan the specifics before leaving Napdu."

"Naturally." Chance crossed his arms over his chest and looked to Arlen. "I hate to say this, but I don't know if this is a job I can do for you."

"It is best you not come, I think," Volgma said in Basic. "Aside from your, hoom, advanced age by human standards, our association may be known to Soergg. He may recognize you."

Chance scowled at the age remark but nodded at the rest. Eyes fell, naturally, to the Fel brothers. Vitor said, "There should be a way



to disguise our faces. We can wear a mercenary's mask, something Ubese or Mandalorian—"

"Not Mandalorian," Marin said. "Too out-of-place on a Hutt world, and you'd never pass as a real Mando anyway."

Vitor opened his mouth but Vedo interrupted him. The droid said, "The unparalleled Vedo believes he has several kinds of facial coverings appropriate for his guards and insists the Princes Fel wear them to Kor Vosadii. He suggests that Master Fel clothe himself as something more age-appropriate. A majordomo, perhaps. He also suggests that, as the sole female present, Jedi Fel masquerade as his entertainer."

It took a second for Marin to get it. "Oh, *shab* no! I'm not going in there without my lightsaber and *all* my clothes."

"The compassionate Vedo accepts your choice and insists the details are negotiable."

"If that is the agreement, it lacks one thing," said Volgma, this time in Huttese. "Our company still needs reparations for its losses."

Vedo made another one of his deep-in-thought rumbling sounds before announcing another idea. "The glorious Vedo believes that in order to steal the droid, a distraction will be needed. Naturally, Soregg's palace has a wealth of valuable items that would fetch handsome prices on the open market."

Arlen sighed. This plan was getting more complicated and the more complicated plans got, the more likely they were to fail. "One request," he said, "If we're going to steal something from Soergg, can we at least lift treasure he stole from someone else? Just to be a little more ethical?"

The Hutts stared at him as if they hadn't understood his words. Then Azzim's big mouth opened wide. Vedo's did too and they began to laugh so hard their rippling bodies shook the room.

He felt a tiny nudge in the Force and looked to side. Marin's expression was very much *I told you so*. She *had* told him so, and he hadn't liked it then, and he didn't like it now. At least they were in this together, he thought, not just him but Vitor and Roan too. After so many years as a family apart at least they'd be able to help each other now.

\* \* \*

When the negotiations with the Hutts were over and the Imperial Knights had a chance to retreat to their ship, Roan felt supremely relieved. He knew that Treis and Mohrgan felt the same; they'd run risky missions before in the name of the Empire but wading deep into convoluted criminal conspiracies was something new and unwelcome.

Vitor had held his own, Roan thought. His older brother had pursued negotiations with a singular focus, which was a little surprising, given how distracted he'd seemed on the way here. After that unexplained outburst on leaving Lantilles he'd been restrained and guarded with his emotions, preoccupied by something he didn't want to name. Perhaps he'd welcomed the negotiations as a distraction.

As Roan and his cousin stepped inside their freighter's compact crew lounge, Mohrgan sighed, "I still don't understand why we can't do anything against these Hutts legally. They're criminals. We have laws against what they do. So does the Alliance. We should work together to stamp out these slugs."

"The Hutts won't recognize our law," Roan said. "They've held this territory for thousands and thousands of years, even before the Old Republic existed. You heard how they talked down to us. They think every younger species is inferior to them and refuse to degrade themselves by recognizing our law."

Mohrgan sighed again. "Well. That sounds like a recipe for a society of gangsters if I've ever heard it."

"Isn't it? Well, now we're playing by their rules. I hope it works."

"Me too."

They paused, standing in the middle of the cabin, facing each other but not speaking. It had been the kind of day when quiet moments swelled with all the things that needed doing.

"I have another question," Mohrgan asked, voice low.

"Go ahead." Roan took a step closer. He already knew this was going to be about Vitor and he knew he wouldn't have an answer.

Before his cousin opened his mouth, Treis' boots came pounding into the room. Hanging from the doorframe he waved

them toward the cockpit. "Come on," he said, "You've got to see this."

Roan and Morhgan followed him up. Vitor was already there, hunched over the comm station. To Roan's surprise there wasn't the holo of another Knight waiting for them but the broadcast from some Alliance-based news channel he didn't recognize.

When he looked closer at the holo's image it was familiar: a fine stone building with the fine white arches and pillars commonly found in Muun architecture. Then his eyes tracked to the headline beneath the image: Breaking News - Explosion at Imperial Banking Clan's Main Office on Muunilist – Details Unavailable at This Time.

"Another one!" Treis pounded the side of a fist against the nearest bulkhead.

Vitor's expression was angry but cold. "They're still at it. And they're not going to stop unless *we* stop them."

"We don't know much about this one yet," Roan said. "We don't even know if the Vosadii helped."

"It doesn't matter," said Vitor. "They'll keep doing this until we find Veers' big nest and destroy it. If we have to work with the Hutts to pull this off, then we will. We're going to end this war, even if it kills us."

He looked across the cabin, meeting each of their eyes. Vitor's final words, his dark determined glare, echoed in their minds, and Roan knew they'd still with them for days to come.

The Skiratas who returned from Lantilles to Kyrimorut descended on the settlement with an air of ebullient triumph. Tamar had participated in more than a few celebrations of work well done, but the scale of the Lantilles job and the haul it yielded produced a bigger show than she'd seen in years. By nightfall everyone in the settlement, from the small kids to the old retired warriors, had gathered on the mountainside under the stars to sit around the fire as pass around bottles and fresh-cooked food.

She tried to enjoy it. If she was going to stop worrying about Marin all this happy clamor was the way, and after a few *buy'ce gal*

she started getting appreciably light-headed, though not as much as Ninet.

"You should have been there, *ba'vodu*," Ninet said to Jovar as she sloshed a bucket of ale with one hand, spilling some on Tamar's lap as she sat awkwardly pinned between the young woman and the old retired fighter.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't slowed you down," Jovar said, but his face creased with a smile. Her uncle didn't do that often, not in front of Tamar, but he'd had some *buy'ce* too and was finally dropping his guard a little.

"Not likely." Ninet waved a finger. "You ever fight in zero-g, *ba'vodu*? I haven't, not until now. It was something. But in zero-g I bet you'd have moved as spry as any of us."

"Only as fast as my old joints permit." Jovar held up his free hand and rotated it. If he was demonstrating how they creaked the surrounding chatter absorbed it.

Ninet slapped Tamar on the arm. "Your *ad'ika* put in a really good showing. *Shab*, we couldn't have done any of it without her, could we?"

"No, we couldn't," Tamar admitted. "The whole thing was Marin's show, start to finish."

She glanced sideways at Jovar as she said it. The old Mando looked down into his cup and took another gulp without a word.

Ninet was still on high. "Most fun job I've done in a while. Two *shabla* Princes of the Empire," she shook her head, grinning. "That's a story to tell when I get old."

"Well, keep the part about the princes quiet for now," Tamar warned. "And about Marin. And about where we got the merchandise in the first place."

"Any idea where you want to fence it?" asked Jovar.

"Mekr and my *buir* talked about it on the way back," said Ninet. "They're thinking, make small offers to different parties. See how interested they are and how much credits they've got to spend."

"On Mandalore or other places?" asked Tamar. Mandos were generally good about keeping business deals between themselves

private, but you never knew how something might leak back to the Vosadii.

"Little of both. Mekr, he's got lots of off-world contacts."

"I know. Just make sure he's careful."

"*Udesii*, of course they'll be careful." Ninet slapped her aunt's arm again. "You're ruining the mood."

"Sobriety is a hazard of advancing years," Jovar drawled.

Tamar shot him a looking but Ninet laughed. "You can enjoy things if you really let yourself, *ba'vodu*, I promise."

"I'm doing just fine," the old Mando lifted his mug slightly.

"Shee, you need to do more than that." Ninet picked herself off the bench. "I need to refill. Anyone?"

Tamar and Jovar waved her off. The young woman shrugged, disappointed, and went around the circle to the keg Dorn had procured from somewhere. That left the two of them alone, staring into the bonfire, listening to everyone else's happy drunken chatter and not knowing what to say.

Finally Jovar said, "She's bold, your *ad'ika*."

"That she is." Tamar kept watching the flame.

"Think she takes after you more or her father?"

"I used to think Arlen. Later I thought, maybe me. Now I'm not so sure."

"She's got powerful tools. It's no wonder." Jovar took another drink.

Tamar looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"You know."

"There's nothing wrong with using the tools you're given."

"Depends on the tools and what it costs to use 'em. Everything's got a price, *Tam'ika*. We're mercenaries. You should know that."

"I do. But the cost of using the Force isn't that bad. Even your *buir* thought so, in the end."

Jovar shrugged. "Maybe he could afford to because he was getting up in his years. But a young Mando, with all those special powers and so many chances to use 'em in so many ways... No. That's asking for trouble."

Tamar finished her mug, savored the final swallow, and asked, "Did you ever think, as you got older..."

"No," Jovar said with finality.

Tamar looked across the fire. Ninet, on the other side of the circle, had been waylaid in conversation with Jind and a few of his little ones. She was maneuvering both hands through the air, probably describing the Lantilles raid to a captivated and impressionable audience. Despite it all, Tamar smiled at the sight.

"I'm going for a refill," she announced. "Anything you want, *ba'vodu*?"

"I'm good."

"You sure."

"Very. Don't wanna turn into an old drunk in my twilight years."

Smart enough, Tamar decided, but she wasn't in her twilight years just yet. She pushed off the bench, made her way toward Ninet, and tried to pretend she was still closer at heart to the young woman ahead than the old man behind.

After delivering his bounty to the client, Kaynar Auchs took his time getting back to Mandalore. There wasn't much to see or do there but no new contract had come to him either, which meant he'd have to prowl around Keldabe some, find the few contacts in the capital that were willing to talk to an Auchs nowadays, and try to get himself on a new job.

He wasn't looking forward to that. In some ways it had been easier taking jobs with non-Mando mercenary groups that spanned the galaxy. Many of those hired guns didn't know anything about Mandalorian clan politics and most that did know didn't care. Sometimes, on those jobs, he hadn't felt like a Mandalorian at all, which had been strangely liberating, though it never lasted.

Since his thoughts were dwelling on some of those old jobs it was strangely serendipitous when, just an hour after setting his *Ultimatum* down on the spaceport outside Keldabe, he got a message from one of his old fellow mercs, an ugly but very competent ex-police from Generis named Yehvok.

While Yaga was down in his cabin gathering everything to take out of the ship, Kaynar sat down in the cockpit and received Yehvok's call.

"It's been a long time," he said when the man's face came up on the holo. "Is this a special occasion?"

"Good to see you too, Auchs," Yehvok said. "You on Mandalore nowadays or out working?"

"Just got back from a job, actually. What's up? Are *you* looking for work?"

"No, I am gainfully employed. Just pulled a big job actually. Called to talk to you about it."

"You do this job by yourself or are you part of a team now?"

"I've got a crew. Joined up with a squad called Blue Moon, if you know them."

"Vaguely," Kaynar said. He'd heard it was somehow affiliated with that the Broken Moon place Gevern used to deal with. He'd also heard its current owner was no fan of Mandos. "They recruiting?"

"I think we've got a full staff right now, but you know how positions open up in our line of work."

Kaynar snorted. "So if this isn't a job offer, what?"

"I just want to let you know we've come into a lot of high-quality merchandise. Weapons, armor, all the stuff you and your Mando buddies might be interested in."

"What kind of quantities?"

"Enough to outfit a small army. We hit a big lode and we're looking to sell it off at very affordable prices."

"So you want me to fence for you? I'll want a cut."

"We might do that, but I also want you to keep an ear open. We didn't plan on it, but we had help on that job."

"Mando help?"

"Exactly. They took a much smaller share of the spoils, but if you keep an ear open you'll probably hear somebody in your neighborhood trying to sell factory-fresh merchandise. Czerkas, Arakyds, Blastechs."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Let potential buyers know they can get more of the same for a cheaper price. Just ask around, keep yourself informed, and if any of your Mando buddies want better value for their money, send them my way."

So in other words, he'd be fencing. "I'll want a cut."

"Sure. We can figure it out."

"But you're sure it was Mandos?"

"I know *beskar* when I see it. They had some friends with 'em too. Almost looked like Jedi."

Kaynar jerked upright in his chair. "Jedi?"

"Well, they had lightsabers. Didn't get to see 'em in use since we arrived a little late."

"How many?"

Yehvok thought a moment. "Five sabers, I think. About ten Mandos."

"You didn't get any names?"

"All I know is that they had some deal with our employer."

Making pacts with Twi'lek crime bosses didn't sound Jedi-like. They may have been rogue Force-users, or impostors, or even Sith. Even so, none of those categories were likely working partners for a bunch of Mandalorians.

With one exception, he thought. "Tell me about the Mandos. Did any of them stand out? Any gear catch your eye?"

Yehvok's ugly mug twisted in thought. A moment passed and he was still thinking. Kaynar had heard individual *bhederin* could recognize each other by the pattern of their stripes, even though they all looked the same to humans. Mandos were like that from *aruetisse*; they saw the armor but not the details that made each *beskar* suit unique.

"Well?" Kaynar prodded.

"I remember... some big guy with dark armor and a big white Mythosaur painted on his helmet. Took up the whole front of the thing."

That didn't ring any bells, but it was something Kaynar could ask around for. "Anything else?"



He snapped his fingers. "There was a woman. Black armor, some blue on it. She took her helmet off. She had black hair, light complexion. Looked older than you or me, but still not bad. Think there was one more woman. She didn't take her helmet off but you could tell from the built. That one had red armor, pretty bright."

It was just like Yehvok to pay special attention to the women. "Anyone else catch your eye?"

"I think that was all. The women, I mean. No, one of the Jedi- or whatever- was one too."

That was more detail than he'd hoped for, and it jarred with the idea already forming in his head. "Thanks, Yehvok. I'll ask around and make sure people get your offer. But I'll want a cut."

"You'll get it."

"Twenty percent."

"Fifteen."

"Twenty or nothing."

"*Eighteen.*" It was also like Yehvok to haggle over a few percentage points.

"Done," said Kaynar. "I'll speak with some people. Let you know how things turned out."

"Knew I could count on you. Talk to you later, old friend."

With that Yehvok turned off the holo. Kaynar sunk back in his chair and let possibilities wash over him. Then he noticed his son standing in the doorway, watching his back.

"You been there a while, lad?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop," said Yaga.

"You weren't. Got your stuff?"

"Ready to go."

"Good. We've got things to do."

When Kaynar wasn't off on business he lodged in a place on the outskirts of Keldabe. He and Yaga moved all the equipment they needed off the ship for an indeterminate stay, and while the boy unpacked his things Kaynar got on the comm again and made another call. An hour after that he set out, leaving Yaga to man the apartment, and made his way through Keldabe's old narrow streets to see a man he hadn't talked to in a very long time.

Given the lives they led, Mandalorians seldom aged well. Shalk Jeban was no exception. At seventy what was left of his hair had gone white, he moved with a limp thanks to old breaks in both legs, and he'd gained too much weight to ever squeeze back in a *beskar* suit. After he let Kaynar through the front door of his ground-level flat he hobbled back to the sofa with the help of a cane. A bottle and two half-filled glasses were poured and waiting. Kaynar guessed he didn't get company often. Mandos too old to fight often found themselves listless in their final years, and Jeban probably didn't have a surplus of friends. He'd been an ally to Kaynar's brother since Gevern first started maneuvering for the position of *Mand'alor*, and after Gevern's death Jeban had thrown his lot in with Jerkal. Nobody liked a two-time loser.

After they clanked glasses and had the first sip Jeban asked, "You still have your boy with you?"

"That's right. We just came back from a bounty hunt."

"You're training him. That's good."

"I do what I can. Not much work for us nowadays."

"Sign of the times," the old man muttered. Jeban had been close with Gevern and Jerkal but Kaynar had never been like them. Gevern had called his youngest sibling weak, more than once to his face, and Jeban probably shared that opinion. He was probably wondering what the wayward little brother who wouldn't fight to be *Mand'alor* was doing here now.

So Kaynar went right into it. He outlined his recent conversation with Yehvok and took it in order, starting with the offer to fence top-grade merchandise and ending with the unnamed clan of Mandalorians and their apparently-Jedi friends.

After listening to it all Jeban hummed thoughtfully, sipped a little more from his cup, and said, "Sounds like Skiratas to me."

"That's what I thought," said Kaynar.

In truth he only knew the Skiratas by reputation. Considered ornery and clannish even by Mando standards, they lived in a mountain settlement far from Keldabe. They had the blood of Old Republic clones in their veins and, rumors said, Jedi blood too. And

they'd run afoul of Gevern, though that was all Kaynar knew. He'd never talked business much with his brother.

"What about the armor I described? Does that sound familiar?"

"That woman in black and blue sounds like a dead ringer for Tamar Skirata," Jeban said, tone twisted by bad memories. "She was the one who really ran afoul of your *vod*. You heard that story?"

"Some of it." He stretched the truth.

"Goes all the way back to Senex-Juvex. I guess you'd have been pretty young in those days. Long story short, she betrayed Gevern- and the rest of us- to the *shabla jeti*. Wrecked the biggest, most profitable work we've had in the past fifty years." He swallowed more brandy and scowled. "Part of it's my fault. She and her cousin Dorn went on a mission with me. I let it all get sour under my watch. *Shabla di'kut* I was, thinking I could control a Skirata."

"Why did she side with the Jedi? I've heard they've got it in the family."

"You hadn't heard?" Jeban snorted. "She *married* a *jeti*, had a kid. Son or daughter, I can't remember. Never showed her face on Mandalore, and Gevern was content to let the Skiratas sulk in the mountains as long as she kept out of his hair. Of course, she got back into things after your *vode* died and Shal took over. I knew her clan was more active. Didn't know they were in with the *jeti* but I guess it's not surprising."

"Did any of those others I described sound familiar? The man with the Mythosaur on his helmet or the woman in red?"

Jeban scratched the white stubble on his chin. "Not the Mythosaur man. Think I'd remember that one. The girl in red... As I recall Dorn has a daughter, takes after him. Ninet. I think she wears red."

"And Dorn?"

"Green. *Shab*, why all the questions?"

"I was just wondering. I always knew the Skiratas were in bad with Gevern. And when he died, I thought... maybe they were involved."

"If you really wanted to find your brother's killer you should have got into it while the blood was warm, not left Jerkal to do it for

you." Jeban drank again. "But he tried everything he could back then. You know what Gevern was into around the time he died?"

"The attack on the Chiss."

"Right. The last I saw him he was leaving Mandalore with Galaset. Kerestian, you remember him?" Kaynar shook his head but the old man went on. "Some rumors later said Galaset ended up in the hands of the Chiss, poor *shabuir*. Jerkal figured Gevern got either killed or captured by the blue boys. But nobody ever knew."

"He didn't say where he and Galaset were going?"

"No. They were going to meet.... *Shab*, who was it... "Jeban stared off into the shadows in the corner of the room. Eventually he decided, "Salvoc, the name was."

"Salvoc?"

"Right. Can't remember the first name right now. I think he had a smithy somewhere down south, but he was never close with your *vod* that I could tell. Jerkal tried to find him but no luck. He thought maybe Salvoc killed Gevern and went into hiding. Maybe they all ended up getting taken by the Chiss."

It seemed like a succession of dead ends, but then, that would be expected after almost a decade for the case to grow cold. Kaynar looked into the amber liquid in his glass. He hadn't had half as much as Jeban yet and decided to remedy that with a big gulp.

It burned so much going down that he broke into a coughing fit. Jeban chuckled; Kaynar's cheeks burned with shame. Just coming here, pretending to be a tough Mando warrior like Gevern, was asking for embarrassment.

"Why'd you come here now, after all this time?" asked Jeban.

Because he was sick of chasing petty bounties and slumming with *aruettisse* mercenary crews. Because his name and clan felt more important now that they meant so little to everyone else. Mostly because he had a growing son who didn't deserve to grow up trapped by family's shame.

"It's not right, what happened to Gevern," he told Jeban. "A *Mand'alor* died and everyone moved on. Nobody even cares about the truth. It's not right at all. Someone should fix that. Since Jerkal

couldn't, I should. I should have done this years ago but it's better late than never."

Jeban considered him and said, "Your brother would appreciate this."

Kaynar nodded like he agreed, but he knew this wasn't about Gevern. It wasn't even about Clan Auch's' honor, not really. It was about *his* honor, and being able to hand his son a better legacy than scrounging bounties on backwaters. If he could do that much, it would wash the shame away.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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When Jade had learned that the remaining Hapan loyalists were hiding inside an abandoned mining station hidden beneath the stormy skin of Orelon VI, she'd pictured some ugly ragged thing barely holding together against the constant onslaught of the gas giant's high-pressure atmosphere. It had hardly sounded the kind of place where you could hide a hundred thousand people.

When *Jade Shadow* arrived, Tanith took the helm and guided them toward the station. Things finally began to make sense. Jade had seen holos of floating cities on Tibanna-rich worlds like Bepin and Taaloran. The Orelon station was something similar, a broad swelling disc with a ventral stalk dropping deep down toward the planet's solid core and anchoring the facility in place. Not much of that could be seen until *Shadow* drew very close and the disc's dim outline could be discerned through the swirling brown, red, and tan-colored gasses. Tanith explained that, in addition to having an outer shell built to withstand the corrosive chemicals of the atmosphere, the station had been modified to erect a powerful shield that could withstand hours of orbital bombardment. Combined with the difficulties in reaching the Orelon system at all,

it made this base an ideal place to hide, though it seemed to Jade this would be a lot harder to evacuate in a hurry if they had to.

A dorsal bulge at the top of the station poked out through the surface of the clouds and it was through this that *Jade Shadow* entered. Great doors dilated open and allowed the ship to drop through the portal. They quickly closed again, sealing the new arrivals inside.

A group of people were waiting in the landing zone and they immediately struck Jade as old-school Hapans. The elder women were draped in layers of fine robes and jewelry. A few handsome male servants hung at the back and tall strong younger women stood in file on the party's flanks, ceremonial pike-weapons pressed at their sides.

As Jade evaluated them. They evaluated her and the party she'd brought. She and Tanith descended the landing ramp first, followed by Tanith's team of exiles and then, finally, the four other Jedi. As requested they were all women and all human, but the loyalists' eyes were drawn to the lightsabers dangling unashamed from their belts.

With effort the lead noble pulled her attention back to Jade and Tanith. The red-haired woman said, "Ducha Reshul, it's an honor to meet you at last."

"You did not tell us you were bringing Jedi." The old aristocrat watched Jade like she was expecting her to transform into a nexu and attack.

"After we learned of what happened at Reboam, we decided Jedi presence would be helpful," Tanith said calmly.

"It's the Jedi who are working with Serissa!" snapped another woman.

"That's not true, and I'd be happy to explain why," Jade said. "We know who your real enemies are and believe me, the Jedi are your best chance of stopping them."

The wariness in their eyes didn't relax, and Tanith asked, "Can we speak to the survivors from Reboam? I'm sure they'll help confirm what we already know."

"Of course," Reshul said. "We've brought her along."

The nobles at the front of the group shuffled aside slightly so Jade and Tanith could see someone standing at the back. It was a teenage girl, a little shorter than normal for Hapans, with pale skin and straight black hair. When all attention fell on her she shifted nervously but said, "My name is Elliah Chalk. I'd like to help in any way I can."

"Chalk?" Tanith asked. "Are you a relation to Serissa?"

"Only distantly."

"Are you a relation of Lenor Chalk?"

Elliah looked surprised. "Yes. She was my mother."

"I see." She shifted her attention back to Reshul. "Let's go someplace where we can all sit down and talk, please."

The Ducha still eyed the Jedi warily, but nodded in agreement. She raised a hand, flashed a silent signal, and the guards and servants executed an about-face and marched for the exit. Everyone else followed: nobles, exiles, Jedi, all thrown together with an awkwardness that felt like thick miasma in the Force.

The loyalists were clearly trying to keep up the pretense of old splendors, but as they walked through the station's inside it felt increasingly thin. The room they were eventually led to had a collection of seats and sofas with cracked cushion-cases lining the rust-tinted metal walls. Somewhere far off, machinery could be heard clanking and rumbling. The one relief was a window that looked out on the slow-churning colors of Orelon VI's upper atmosphere. Without this natural light and view, this must have been a maddening place to live.

The guards, servants, and most of the Jedi remained on their feet, but Tanith, and Jade sat close to Elliah so she could tell her story. The teenager went into detail explaining what she and her brother had done to hide on Reboam and the appearance of the three lightsaber-wielding aliens who's slaughtered the nobles. They were clearly dealing with Sith here, but a few points of her explanation struck Jade as insufficient, namely how Elliah and Hogrum had both hidden and crept from hiding at the same time despite being on opposite sides of the room.



At the moment that was less important than the Sith themselves, so when Elliah was done Jade put that aside and started to explain to the loyalists what was really happening. She didn't say anything about Darth Terrid specifically, but she detailed what the Sith were, how they were different from Jedi, and how they'd helped overthrow Tenel Ka all those years ago.

Jade could feel strong skepticism from the old women and some confusion when she explained the difference between Jedi and Sith. Nonetheless, Ducha Reshul tried to look at things practically.

"If this is all true," she said, "Then some things make sense. We always knew Demia had secret agents doing her bidding. Not even the royal security teams knew about them."

"The big shift seems to be when Serissa took over," Tanith said. "What can you tell us about *how* she did it? Serissa was reported dead. Demia even had a funeral service."

Reshul shook her head. "You probably know as much as we do. We were told the princess was dead, but never found the body. Demia secluded herself in grief. There were rumors Serissa had tried a coup against Demia, failed, and been executed. No evidence, just talk, because that happened to her mother. A month or so later Demia was dead- poisoned, they said- and Serissa was very much alive."

"Are you sure that's Serissa?" asked Jade.

"What are you suggesting? A clone? Some... Sith impostor?"

"I don't know. But after she returned, did you speak with Serissa? Were you in close proximity to her?"

"Yes. Several times. I was... a political prisoner at the time. She released me because she thought I was an enemy of Demia. She thought I could be useful. But I saw what she had planned."

"So it *is* the Serissa you knew before."

"It is the same woman. I guarantee that."

"I think what happened is fairly clear," Tanith said. "Either Serissa convinced the Sith to help her ambitions or the Sith are using her to advance theirs. It's probably a combination of both."

"We should have never allowed any Force-users in the Consortium at all," one woman grumbled.

Tanith shot her a glare. "You had a Jedi queen for over thirty years. You've had Sith in charge for less than ten. You can't see the difference?"

The nobles shifted uncomfortably and looked away. They'd hated Tenel Ka for putting a stopper on their own conniving ambitions. The Sith had given Serissa the chance to fulfill her own power-lust beyond anyone's imaginations, and in doing so she'd ravaged the society that had created her. Jade doubted these women saw the irony.

There was one exception. Elliah Chalk was looking straight at her with an expression of earnest curiosity.

"Realistically speaking," Tanith said, "There's not much we can do against the Sith for now. I'd like to talk about what we came here for: getting your people off this base before Serissa corners you."

"You'd accept us on your... *New Hapes*?" one woman asked.

"We would. We have about three million people and a fertile world with plenty of room to settle. We're still working on the logistics of your extraction, but we're prepared to welcome you."

The nobles' skepticism was obvious and Jade wasn't surprised. Their culture didn't prize mercy and forgiveness. They clearly didn't expect any from their old enemies.

"If we come to your *New Hapes*," Reshul said, "Will we be expected to bow to your... Jedi Queen?"

"Allana Djo is *your* Queen, as recognized by the Galactic Alliance and the people of *New Hapes*," Tanith said firmly. "You will respect her as such. However, the way we actually govern things is quite different from what you expect. You'll have plenty of autonomy there."

Before they could delve into precise political bickering, Jade asked, "Is Mistress Chalk still needed here? I've noticed she looks tired."

The girl flushed, embarrassed and a little confused. Reshul said, "No. I believe she can go."

Jade stood up. "I'll escort her to her quarters, if I may."

The nobles didn't understand, but most of them were glad to have one less Jedi in the room. Reshul said, "Yes, you may. Thank you... Master Skywalker."

Jade expected some servants or guards to trail them through the halls and was pleasantly surprised to get herself alone with Elliah. The girl didn't say a word as they started through the station's narrow, unadorned hallways. She didn't know what to make of this situation, so Jade took the first step.

"Thank you for what you said back there. That information will help us greatly."

"I just explained what happened."

"I know. I was wondering if you could clarify something."

"Yes. All right."

"You said you and your brother hid on opposite sides of the chamber. How did you know he was safe when everyone else was dying? Did you see him take shelter?"

"No. It was too confused for that."

"Then how did you know? And how did you both come out safe at the same time?"

The girl hesitated, then said, "We just *knew*. We've always been... aware of each other's feelings."

"Can you tell what he's feeling right now?"

Elliah stopped, narrowed her eyes like she was thinking hard. Finally she said, "He's bored, I think."

Jade smirked. "That's interesting. And can you *send* thoughts to each other, if you try?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe."

Jade took that for as a *yes*. She'd trained with Jodram since they were young and by Elliah's age they'd developed a similar mental bond. The ramifications were interesting, not just for Elliah and Hogrum. The Hapans were supposed to have purged Force-sensitives from their bloodline centuries ago but the power had cropped up here, in the reigning Queen's family, no less.

Elliah had seemed shy and confused until now, so it took Jade by surprise when she looked at the Jedi and asked, "Do you think we have the Force?"

"What do you know about the Force?"

"Almost nothing. But they say it has less substance than air but more power than all the jewels and armies in the galaxy."

That was an impressively poetic way to put it. "I like to think so."

"Do you think that's what Hogrum and I have?"

"I think that's possible. Can I meet your brother?"

"Of course. He should have been here too, but they..." She looked back at the chamber from which they'd come and frowned. "He's just a boy to them."

"Well, he's not to me," Jade said with a smile. "Come on, let's go find him."

Something Allana had learned from her years in politics was that the best way to attack a problem was to come at it sideways. The extraction of the Hapan loyalists from their hidden base at Orelon was one such problem. With the trouble at Arquilla still ongoing, the triumvirs would be wary of sending a military task force into the Hapes Cluster. It could too easily look like, despite being an essentially humanitarian mission. As legally-recognized Queen of Hapes it was within Allana's right to request assistance, but just by being the one to ask she knew she'd divide the triumvirs.

That was why she instead elected to meet with Gavas Avic of Calibop in the senator's office on Coruscant. One of the more agreeable aspects of her job as Chief of State had been shepherding younger representatives whose views on politics matched her own. Avic had arrived in the Senate during Allana's third year in office and since then he's risen to Chair of the Defense Committee. Calibops were generally known as talkers rather than soldiers, but Avic was a former commodore in the Alliance navy. Allana had recognized his military credentials as well as rhetorical ones and helped guide him to the position he held today.

He therefore ushered Allana into his office with welcoming wing. "It has been some time, Master Djo. We do not see you on Coruscant often enough these days."

"I do miss it.... Occasionally."

Avic whistled through his beak, his race's amused laughter. "If you've burdened yourself by coming here I'm sure you must have a good reason. Is this about Arquilla?"

"Actually, no. This is about something closer to home."

His small eyes blinked. "A Jedi matter?"

"No. My *older* home, Hapes."

"Ah. Ah. I'm aware of what's been happening there these past years. So is everyone who cares to listen."

"There's not many of those, unfortunately."

"Yes. It is shameful, frankly."

"It's not entirely their fault. When Hapes left the Alliance it shut itself off as fully as it could. No diplomats, no envoys, not even news reporters or tourists. That's not surprising. Hapes was closed off from the Empire and the Old Republic too."

"Still, we haven't been blind. The intelligence your agents have been collecting all these years is very appreciated by the military and the Defense Council."

"That's what I was hoping to talk to you about, Chairman. As head of the Council you have the authority to take matters directly to the triumvirate."

"As legal head of Hapes, so do you." Avic knew it was more complicated than that; he knew that her Jedi heritage meant some members of the Alliance would always side against her. He asked, "What precisely are we talking about?"

"There are currently about one hundred thousand Hapan loyalists holed up in a system called Orelon. My agent Tanith Zel is there now and they've formally requested Alliance help in evacuating to New Hapes. The exiles don't have the equipment to do it themselves, which is why we need help from the military."

As a former politician she knew how to get small lies through. Just as she told Avic that the loyalists had officially requested help, so Tanith was telling the loyalists that the Alliance had officially offered it. If they got caught out later it would be a small price to pay for saving so many lives.

"One hundred thousand," Avic considered. "We have troop transports to carry that much, of course. What kind of planet is this Orelon?"

"A gas giant. They're located on a mining station in the upper atmosphere."

"That can make transferring people slower. But that's less important. Master Djo, is Orelon currently under threat?"

"Not currently, but as the last loyalist base, Serissa will be hunting for it hard. And you know what she'll do when she finds it."

"Indeed." Avic's feathers rustled in agitation. Evacuation ships would need a major military escort, and if that escort got into a fight with Serissa's navy after invading its sovereign space, it could be a disaster for the Alliance's image. And they both knew that, in politics, image came first. Noble intentions were way down the line.

"What's been happening in Hapes shames us all," Allana said. "It should never have gotten this bad. My own feelings toward the loyalists kept me on the sidelines for too long. Someone has to act."

"I don't need to remind you, Master Djo, that you succeeded a Chief of State who resigned because he ordered a military intervention in Senex-Juvex after the Senate explicitly voted it down."

"I know. And his moral bravery saved billions. But this is different. The loyalists are *asking* for this. Yes, there's a danger in sending troops to Orelon. But where will our moral authority be if a hundred thousand people beg for our help and we let them get slaughtered?"

Avic's long neck sunk low. "Moral authority, you say. We heard those words so rarely. Tell me, how did you ever manage to be Chief of State and Jedi Knight at the same time?"

"It wasn't easy," Allana smiled faintly.

The Calibop lifted his head. "I have friends in the Navy's senior command. I'll bring them with me when I talk to the triumvirate."

"Oh, Gavas. Thank you so much."

"They'll want to see proof of the loyalists' request for help."

"Don't worry. I'll have it when you need it." Allana smiled tightly, and knew, by hook or crook, she would. Because that, too, was politics.

Despite having spent most of his life in the Hapes Cluster, and many nights inside the Fountain Palace itself, Darth Terrid had never stepped foot inside its throne room until now. It was an immense space meant for an audience of thousands, bigger than the whole interior of the Sith Temple on Shedu Maad. It was nighttime now and no light fell through the transparisteel atrium roof. Its empty space seemed to yawn all the wider for the shadows that filled it.

Darth Saydel was where she belonged, on the fan-backed emerald throne she'd taken from her grandmother who'd in turn taken it from a Jedi queen. As Terrid stood on the raised dais before her she seemed to revel in her audience of one.

"Once the last of the loyalists are gone there will be a great celebration here." She held out a hand to indicate the shadow-filled expanse. "Everyone in the Consortium will see it. Even the Alliance will know about it, and feel shamed by their own cowardice."

"It should be quite a show," Terrid said dryly. "When will you announce their *next* campaign?"

"Not then. My soldiers deserve the celebrate, and to rest." She smirked and sank against the throne's fan-shaped back. "Besides, we shouldn't be hasty in attacking the Jedi. We need to make sure our control *here* is secure."

"You know what needs to be done. I've already sabotaged the defenses around our temple. When you go to Shedu Maad, turn the entire planet to ash. It's the only way to be sure we kill him."

There was no need to specify which *him*. "What about *you*, Terrid? Are you sure your plan for Orelon will work?"

"Very. I've studied the schematics of the older miners' habitat. I'll split our forces into two teams once we get aboard. One will disable the shields. The other will stand by to run. The moment the defenses come down you'll be able to destroy the thing from orbit and kill everyone aboard."

"Including our unwanted Sith." Her eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you can handle Darth Maleth?"

"I can hide my thoughts from his mind."

"And Inexor, Morlid, and your other allies?"

"I'm confident."

"And Kroan? Are you sure it was wise to bring him inside? He is an ambitious man."

"Ambition is what we need to take the fight to the Jedi. Trust in me. I've been planning this for a very long time."

"We've been planning it," she corrected. "Just keep in mind, if you run into trouble on Orelon, I won't be able to help you from Shedu Maad."

"I was going to tell you the inverse." He gave her a wry smile. "But then, I'm sure we're *both* capable of taking care of ourselves. So all that really matters is trust."

She let the vague insinuate roll off her with an easy shrug. "If we've come this far together, Darth Terrid, I see no question of that. Come closer."

She beckoned with a finger and he stepped up to place one foot on the base of her throne. Her hand reached out and took his, two palms down, fingers interlocked.

"This is just the next step," she said. "Not the first, not the last."

And she was right. There seemed to be a straight path that they'd moved on together, starting at the night he'd ambushed the princess in her bedroom and leading up to this. Where that path led after Krayt's elimination he couldn't say for sure. The ravaging the Jedi Order and the rise of the new Sith Empire backed by Hapan armies, so he hoped. Whether they'd walk that path together or separately- whether Saydel would betray him once he'd outlived his usefulness- he didn't know, but he'd made preparations for either. As he looked at her dark eyes he decided they needed to walk this path together as long as they were able. They'd already accomplished so much more working in cooperation than they ever had alone.

\* \* \*



The chamber in which Darth Krayt dreamed lay buried far beneath the repossessed Jedi pyramid on Shedu Maad. On first sight it looked like a coffin, though the red-tinted translucent crystal of its cover allowed the viewer to look down on the sleeping Dark Lord. Krayt lay on his back, encased in jagged Yuuzhan Vong armor that had bonded with his body decades ago. His arms were crossed over his chest, and placed atop his folded wrists was his spiked mask of the same material. His face was plain to see. It was the face of an old human with long gray hair and wrinkles that creased the once-straight black tribal tattoos Krayt had received when just a child.

The heavy stone doors that blocked off the vestibule opened only rarely, and Darth Kheykid was surprised when Darth Wyyrlok had invited him to follow her into the sacred space. The sleeping Dark Lord's presence, already felt from the vestibule, was enough to stagger the Barabel and instill him with a rare surge of fear.

Darth Wyyrlok sensed it, as she was bound to. The Chagrian looked over her shoulder and her lips formed a tight, toothless smile. "You should be honored, Lord Kheykid."

"I am, deeply. But I do not understand why I am here."

Wyyrlok walked over to the Krayt's stasis chamber and ran black-and-red fingers lightly over its glass-smooth case. "The One Sith are reaching a crossroads. We depend more than ever on those whose loyalty we can trust. You've never strayed from Lord Krayt's vision. You've never even been tempted. We haven't forgotten that."

Kheykid bowed his head in acknowledgement. The One Sith had worked hard to forge him into a weapon since the day he'd hatched. Darth Xoran had guided him to become more than he would have been under any other master and it was a debt he could never fully pay, though he'd spent every day since her death trying nonetheless. There were some who claimed Darth Xoran's passion for bringing justice to Senex-Juvex had drawn her away from Darth Krayt's vision, but Kheykid had known her better than anyone else and he'd never believed that. Xoran's vision and Krayt's were one in the same. The galaxy they'd create would know the stern justice and final peace that only the Sith were strong enough to bring to the squabbling vermin.

"What would you have me do?" Kheykid asked Wyyrlok, asked the man sleeping beneath her fingers.

"It is our belief that the battle at Orelon will not go as Darth Terrid assures us. We need you to be alert, be ready, and make certain everything still ends in our favor."

The new responsibility joined the weight of Darth Krayt's power on his shoulders and drove him to his knees. Darth Kheykid bowed his head and held both hands claws-up in a sign of obedience.

"Please," he said, "Tell me what I need to do."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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From space, the vast damaged land on Zonama Sekot's southern hemisphere looked like a broad but healing scar of sickly brown surrounded by natural green. Seeing it from the surface revealed the full devastation done to the planet by Yuuzhan Vong bioweapons a hundred and thirty years ago. The research complex, a rare structure of durasteel and turadium on a world where most buildings were organically grown, sat amidst rolling hills of arid land. Ground-level passageways connected a set of five angular gray buildings, each with its own purpose, and the broad landing pad sat in the center. Outside the complex there was not the hint of civilization for a five hundred kilometers in any direction.

When the terraforming project began, seeds from Zonama's natural flora- grasses, ferns, tall colorful bora trees- had been planted in the southern hemisphere's desertified landscape. Attempts at soil purification and irrigation had produced only what ringed the research complex now: tufts of dried grass and the occasional gnarled, stunted tree that struggled to pull nutrients from the earth. It was a painful reminder how one rash act, inflicted by one party on another without either understanding the consequences, could haunt generations to come.

Jaina very much hoped that could change. So far the reclamation project had been undertaken by a mix of Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong scientists who'd used solely native plants and their genetically similar Yuuzhan Vong-bred equivalents. The xenobiologists from the universities on Mrlsst would have a wider range of understanding.

When the shuttle bearing the scientists arrived, Jaina was on the landing pad to greet them. So were Tahiri and several Yuuzhan Vong shapers, including the chief of his caste, Neshri Yim. Kol and his young friend Nei Rin had accompanied Jaina and the others down to the southern hemisphere but for this initial meeting Jaina had decided to keep the children in the complex's habitat section.

The first being to come down the shuttle's ramp was the Jedi pilot who'd met the scientists and flown them on the secret route to Zonama Sekot. The green-skinned Mirialian scientist Yeris Utara gave the two older Jedi a nod and took his place beside them. Next were the two lead scientists. Jaina had spoken with them via holo but as they came down side-by-side the contrast was almost comical. The reedy violet-skinned Ho'din professor Soet towered some three meters tall, while her colleague, the Mrlssi Shol Trlaa, barely topped one meter. Behind them came a trio of younger research assistants, two humans and one Togruta.

"It is an honor to meet you at last," said Neshri Yem. The Master Shaper crossed his arms over his chest in a Yuuzhan Vong salute and bowed his head, causing the tentacles of his living headdress to writhe.

It was a sight Jaina and Tahiri had gotten use to over the years, but newcomers to Zonama Sekot, including many adult Jedi, had a hard time dealing with the alien-ness of the Yuuzhan Vong. No matter how much their culture had changed over the past century they were still, stubbornly, Yuuzhan Vong in many ways, and Jaina guess they'd remain so another century on.

The Ho'din reacted smoothly with a low bow of her own, and the Mrlssi said, "Greetings to you as well Master Shaper. And you, Masters Jedi. We look forward to working with you."

"As you can see, there is much work to do," said Neshri Yim. "Together, I hope, our combined learnings can heal this... fascinating world."

"Together," echoed Soett. "Yes, we would like that very much."

It was the kind of start Jaina had been hoping for. After pleasantries were exchanged the research assistants began moving crates of supplies out of the shuttle and Yeris Utara escorted them to the laboratory space prepared.

Jaina, Tahiri, and the older scientists stepped to the side and let the younger ones do the heavy lifting. Soett and Trlaa had been given an extensive briefing on the land reclamation efforts undertaken thus far, and they understood the details better than Jaina ever could. Nonetheless, this was their first time being on Zonama Sekot and as they waited for cargo to offload both scientists kept looking around as if they expected something to happen.

When Soett was looking the distant barren ridges and Trlaa at the clear blue sky, Jaina asked them, "Do you have any questions for us? Anything you haven't asked before?"

She could sense they both had things they wanted to ask, but still they hesitated. They'd surely heard the stories about Zonama Sekot's governing consciousness, but few beings who couldn't know the Force would even consider such a thing possible. Jaina had more than once listened to learned scientists who'd never been here give elaborate lectures on 'the phenomenon of Zonama Sekot' offering a variety of more plausible explanations as to Sekot's supposed self-awareness. She recalled that debunking Sekot had become something of a fad in academia a decade after the Yuuzhan Vong War. Hallucinations caused by unique plant life had been the most common explanation.

Soett chose the oblique approach. "It would be helpful if we could see a normal biome first-hand so we can observe how its systems operate."

"This is possible, of course," said the master shaper, "But I believe we've already provided you with information from several distinct habitat zones in the northern hemisphere."

"This is true, tsi," said Tlaa, "And for now it will suffice. But later, perhaps, we can see the environment you aim for."

"We'll arrange for that," Jaina said, "But for later."

"Tsi, of course."

One their assistants, a dark-haired young man, reappeared and called across the landing pad, "We've moved everything into the laboratory!"

"Then we'll join you." Soett looked to Neshri Yim. "Perhaps you'd like to instruct us on some of your... equipment."

The master shaped bowed and followed the squat Mrlssi and gangling Ho'din off the pad.

"They're curious," Tahiri commented once they were alone.

"They're scientists," said Jaina. "That's their job, isn't it? And we have nothing to hide."

"I wasn't criticizing. I just think that if they're looking for quantifiable proof of Sekot's consciousness, they'll be disappointed. Especially if they start looking here."

Jaina looked out on the desolate hills. One thing they'd learned over the years was that the planet's living awareness was stronger in certain parts than others. It was born from the Force and thus from life, and it was strongest in the deep old forests of the northern continent. By Sekot's own admission, it was barely able to manifest its illusions in these wastes, let alone exert greater powers.

That was a very different environment than what Kol and Nei Rin had known so far. The difference was uncomfortable, but it also provided a chance for education. As the most senior Jedi on Zonama, as Kol's great-aunt, and as a fellow descendant of the Skywalker line, it was Jaina's purpose to make sure he learned his lesson.

On the flight down to the southern hemisphere, Jaina had sternly warned Kol Skywalker that the research he'd be helping in was a very serious, very adult business and he'd best do exactly as he was told by the scientists and shapers involved. She had to have known how much he hated being talked down to, but she'd done it anyway, just to show she was serious.

At least she'd only done it once. The scientists talked down to Kol all the time, which wasn't surprising, but he still hated it. The two senior researchers, a Ho'din and a Mrlssi, were bothered that an eleven-year-old had even been brought into their facility, though they both tried to hide agitation beneath professionalism. The research assistants were a little better and one of the young humans, a woman named Neita who couldn't have been older than his cousin Marin, enlisted Kol to run messages and material back and forth between the laboratory the Alliance scientists worked in and the section where the Yuuzhan Vong shapers had installed their organic devices. Kol got the impression he reminded Neita of a younger brother or cousin. This all seemed to annoy the other human assistant, a man about the same age called Rennis, but Neita blew off his concerns.

Nei Rin got better treatment. It helped that she'd actually studied shaping and had proven talent despite her age. When Kol ran material over to the shapers' lab she was always working with the adults, helping them run tests and examining the samples of soil and plant life from the surrounding wastes.

After the second day, Nei Rin tried to explain to Kol what they were actually doing. It was a less dumbed-down version of what Neita had already told him but getting a confusing mix of Yuuzhan Vong and Alliance biological terminology thrown at him- from an eleven-year-old girl no less- made him even more confused. It also made him realize that maybe those grown-up scientists were right to talk down to him, because even though he had special talent in the Force he knew next to nothing about shaping and xenobiology. This in turn left him wondering why he'd even wanted to come down here in the first place.

He was in that despondent state that his great-aunt summoned him. Jaina insisted, firmly and without explanation, that he join her on a trip outside the research compound. He asked if it was to collect samples, because it was the only reason he could think of to go into that dry and toxic wasteland. Jaina had refrained from answering and ushered him onto one of the light repulsor-skimmers the scientists used to journey across the hills.

They flew over the undulating landscape and the compound's block gray buildings disappeared from view. Still Jaina kept flying, and from the gentle nudged the old woman gave the control yoke it seemed she was trying to get someplace specific, though to Kol one dry ridge looked like any other. The only markets were occasional gnarled trees that struggled to grow out of poisoned soil. If his great-aunt had taken him on this trip to remind him how drastically and bleakly different this southern hemisphere was from the verdant north, she'd gotten her point across.

Finally, Jaina slowed the skimmer to a halt at the base of one low ridge. It seemed as unremarkable as the ones around it, but the old woman lowered herself to the parched, clay-like ground and waved for Kol to follow.

She started up the hill with slow, shaking steps. Kol knew his great-aunt was stubborn, or *willful*, as his uncle Arlen always phrased it, and he resisted the urge to reach out and help her climb to the top. He stayed alongside her the whole way in case she should fall, and one or twice Jaina paused under the hot sun, long white hair blowing in listless wind, breathing a little hard, but she always kept going.

Kol had heard all the stories of what this woman had accomplished, never from her, but often enough from his mother and Arlen and sometimes Marin. They'd called her the Sword of the Jedi once, though she'd sworn off that title long before Kol was born. She'd slain a Yuuzhan Vong warmaster at age twenty-one. She'd watched her younger brother die and been forced to kill her twin after he fell to the Dark Side. She'd watched so many other friends and family die too, and along with Tahiri she seemed to Kol to be a piece of living history, intimidating for all the darkness and pain she'd endured but deserving of automatic respect for the same reason.

It was for that reverence that he didn't try to touch her as she climbed up that hill. He let her do it by herself; she'd accomplished so many more difficult tasks in her life.

They reached the crest together, and Kol saw nothing but a patch of dry grass blowing in the wind and the gnarled husks of a



few dead plants. He spun in a full circle to take in the endless brown hills on either side, the sun shining hot from the clear blue sky. Finally he rested eyes on his great-aunt. She shuffled across the hilltop and lowered herself cross-legged to the dirt beside a dead plant.

"Sit down with me," she said.

Kol lowered himself into the same pose so they watched each other with the plant in between them. She pulled the hood of her Jedi robe up to shield her face from the sun but Kol wore only his pale apprentice tunic. It came down hot on the back of his neck and he tried to ignore it.

"What are we here got?" he asked.

"Close your eyes," Jaina said, and she did just that.

Still not sure why, Kol did as he was told. Brightness from outside bled red through his eyelids. That light on his back felt hotter than ever. Sweat started to prickle on his neck.

"Do you feel life here?" asked Jaina.

Kol knew what his great-aunt was asking. When he'd first arrived on Zonama Sekot, she and Tahiri both had taken him out into the forests to meditate. They'd made him close his eyes and reach out with the Force and sense the myriad living beings around him. First they'd urged him to find the totality. In the forests it had been easy to feel them all: birds high above, insects buzzing in the air and burrowed in the dirt, the growing boras, the patches of grass and moss, even the fresh-fallen leaves that carpeted the earth and carried faint, dimming whispers of the trees they'd lived as part of. Once he'd found the totality, they'd urged him to find the specifics. He'd had to concentrate on a certain bird or one single bug and try to feel that creature and only that creature in the Force.

He'd hated that part. He'd complained and said it was too hard, and that it was anyway pointless because whatever presence a bird or insect had in the Force it was tiny and unimportant.

Jaina had scolded him hard. The Force was *all* life, she'd insisted, and the great mysterious matrix that made up Sekot's consciousness relied on birds and insects and trees and even dying leaves more than it relied on self-important sentients like two Jedi

sitting in the dirt. Then she'd ordered him to focus on one single leaf sitting in front of him and felt only *that* in the Force.

The leaf had still carried the colors of a bora tree but they'd started to drain and its flat body turned dry and brittle. Kol had spent hours focusing, pushing away the stronger Force-presence of his great-aunt and everything else until it was just him and that dying object, and when he focused on it hard it became a gateway to so much more. He became aware of the great tree from which it had fallen, the soil from which it had gained nutrients for those vivid colors, the insects that had burrowed inside the bark and the birds that had patched nests inside its branches and made new life.

All that revelation had come on him in an instant and left him breathless. Jaina had told him that the key to understanding the Force instead of just *using* it was to realize that it bound the smallest things to the greatest, and as a Jedi you had to be able to touch both at once and both separately, always knowing then when you touched the small you touched the great just as the reverse was true.

He'd learned that lesson in the forest. He didn't know what she wanted to teach him here, in the wastes.

"Do you feel life?" she asked a second time.

"I feel you," he said.

"What else?"

Kol concentrated. He reached out with the Force again. He tried to feel the brown grass behind Jaina and found something faint, something brittle, something blowing in the wind and dried out by the sun, something reaching as far as it could into the poisoned earth and pulling what little food there was to have. He knew the grass was doomed and starving and he felt, just a little, the ache of hunger in his stomach, as though his body was acting in resonance.

"That's good," Jaina whispered. "What else?"

There wasn't much else to find. Kol groped beyond the grass but felt nothing. Dry and sun-baked hills rolled in every direction but there was no more life than a few more patches of desperate grass, distant and faint on other hills. This landscape was as hopelessly barren as that of Ossus.

"You're looking too far," Jaina said.

He didn't know what she meant. She felt that, and she touched him in the Force and guided his awareness as though she'd taken his hand. And he felt something from the plant in front of them, something like the desperate grass but even fainter. It was alive but life seemed to have shriveled inward, so not even warmth from the sun enriched the dried skin of its gnarled body.

"I feel it," said Kol, "But it's dying."

"Of course it is. This came from a bora seed, planted during a reclamation attempt years ago."

Kol felt pity for it. The boras in the north were high, mighty, beautiful things. Their forests sang with life. It seemed cruel to have planted one here, where it was doomed to fail.

"You have empathy, even for this?" Jaina asked.

"Even this is life."

"That's very good. But what can you do for it?"

"I.... can't do anything. It's dying. It should have never been planted in the first place."

"Maybe it shouldn't have, but what's done is done. We take what is given and we do with it what we can."

"I don't understand. I can't *do* anything." If this was all some lesson about how important it was for him to pass around soil samples for scientists he was going to be angry.

"Kol, what is the Force *for*?"

It was a question so huge there seemed no answer. It was a tool. It was a way to communicate and share empathy. In wrong hands and right ones, it could be used as a weapon. He'd heard some Jedi could use it to peer beyond their place in time. It was a way to sense your oneness with creation and find a place for your small self in all that greatness.

Everything seemed small in the desert, even the Force. It was why he'd never liked Ossus. He said, defeated, "It can't do much here."

He felt her disappointment, and then he felt her consciousness pull away from his. She was still there, sinking deeper into the Force. He stayed near her and tried to feel what she felt, experience

what she did. It felt like he was looking into a great well and peering to its bottom.

She touched that dying plant in the Force, and because she was life and it was life she let that life be shared. Kol understood what she was doing; even though they were both a part of everything Jaina's part was still greater and stronger but she could still pass part of her life to the smaller and weaker.

Kol's eyes popped open. Light and vision didn't chase away the depths of feeling he'd found with his eyes closed. His bond with Jaina surged greater than ever as her power flowed into the plant and changed the plant. Its gnarled body seemed to unwind before Kol's eyes. Its rough dried skin grew smooth and gained a touch of green. A tiny bulb appeared, grew larger, and opened to release a single gleaming leaf that seemed newer and richer than a whole forest in springtime.

And then Jaina stopped. The connection faded and Kol's awareness snapped out of the Force. He blinked and stared at the plant again. That leaf was still there, shining up at the sun.

"That was incredible," Kol told his aunt.

When he looked at his aunt she was bent forward slightly and her breathing was deeper than before. When she met his eyes she straightened and said, "That was the essence of Force healing. True Jedi healers don't pull the Force out of nothing to mend broken bones. They draw the Force through themselves and all the life around them to make the weaker strong."

"You share power... from the great to the small."

"Exactly." She looked down at the plant before her, living but so fragile on the dry hilltop. "When I was young I was a warrior. You know that they called me. And I did things wish I'd never had to do. There are so many things that should be different but aren't, like a bora trying to grow in a waste. Since I lay down the sword I've tried to learn healing instead of hurting. I'll never be as good at is as some Jedi I've known, but the core of being a Jedi is using the Force to protect life, not fight battles."

His thoughts drew back to his older brother and his latest adventure with Arlen. "Battles are still part of it, though."

"Yes." Her face creased in a sad smile. "Great and small. Weak and strong. Healing and hurting. Everything is part of the Force. Even Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong. Even if we can't feel them."

"Even light and dark?" Kol whispered.

"Oh, yes. Those most of all." She reached down to stroke the single leaf. Sunlight showed all the wrinkles and veins and bones of her small hand. "Being a Jedi is also about making a choice. Whenever we can we should choose light over dark. The weak over the strong."

Kol stared at that plant for a long time, thought about its fragile strength, and finally said, "We can't go around and fix this entire continent with the Force."

"I'm afraid not."

"We'll need those scientists."

"That's why they're here."

"So really... This is about why I need to go back and help carry their soil samples." He thought he'd be mad about it, but Kol was smiling instead.

"Among other lessons." Jaina smiled back.

"I think I got those too. Can we go back now? I'm getting sunburned."

"Then our lesson is over."

Kol unbent his legs and hopped to his feet. Jaina stood more slowly, and when she'd risen halfway up her whole body trembled and tipped off balance. Kol jumped forward and grabbed her. He pushed back against her weight, pushed her upright and didn't let go until she was standing and stable.

"Thank you, Kol," she said. "I'm not as strong as I used to be."

She shuffled slowly down the slope, back to the skimmer. He stayed right beside her, ready to catch if he had to, but she made it without falling. He knew that passing life into that plant had taken her more strength than normal. The small act had left her tired, and in a woman her age the sight naturally frightened him. When they got to the skimmer she sat down, took its controls in two bony hands, and kicked it into motion.

They went sailing smoothly away from that hilltop, and Kol doubted they'd come back again. Still, he knew his aunt had left just a bit of herself there. Uncaring of the danger to herself, she'd passed power from the stronger to the weaker. It was what a Jedi did. It was what the Force was for.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Chorax was one of the countless unremarkable, barely-populated little planets that not even Kaynar Auchs, in his slumming through cheap jobs in the Outer Rim, expected to set foot on. That he was putting his ship in down its main spaceport- if such a term was even appropriate- was a sign of the strange twist his life had just taken.

His friend Yehvok's news about the Skirata clan had stirred something inside him, a need to find out the truth behind his brother's death, not for Gevern's sake but his own, and that of his son Yaga. What he'd learned from Shalk Jeban had impelled him to roll back the years. Gevern's disappearance had set off a messy succession struggle to become the next *Mand'alor* and Kaynar had laid low for all of it, but he recalled, very dimly, hearing about some Mando activity around that time that had nothing to do with Gevern.

Going through old news reports stirred up memory. Eight years back, at the same time that Gevern had disappeared, there'd been an incident on Balmorra. A lot of other things had been happening at that time too, but this one stayed in the news cycle thanks to the lengthy legal battle that followed. The Chairman of Kuat Drive Yards, Retor of Kuhvult, had supposedly been assassinated or

kidnapped by the Jedi during a business conference on the industrial world. The Jedi claimed he'd been a covert Sith Lord and had escaped them entirely. KDY had marshalled every legal weapon it had but the Jedi Order's unusual legal status helped them deflect a lot of the Kuati lawyer's blows. More importantly, nobody had been able to ascertain *what* had happened to Retor: assassinated, kidnapped, or escaped. Even with public attention turning against the Jedi just then, the Alliance courts had been unable to come up for a punishment when they didn't even know the crime.

The legal wrangling didn't interest Kaynar, but what had caught his attention was the eyewitness reports. KDY's lawyers had dug up testimony from everyone possible and many reported seeing armored figures teaming up with the Jedi to attack Retor's hotel room. Some had specifically called those armored commandos Mandalorian.

Mandos, fighting with Jedi. One eyewitness specifically recalled spotting a Mando in bright red armor that stood out against the more staid colors of the rest. It was nothing definite, but it pointed to Clan Skirata activity off Mandalore the same time Gevern was killed.

Kaynar looked into other things too. He'd eventually found the Krevn Salvoc who'd owned a metalworking business and disappeared the same time as Gevern. Salvoc apparently imported materials from offworld sites and it took some digging through his defunct business' public records to find out which specific planets he'd owned property on.

After putting together a short list Kaynar went even further and started comming the local port authorities on those worlds, asking they had flight records stretching back eight years. All those planets were backwaters and half of them didn't even keep lists from yesterday, but the old stationmaster he'd talked to on Chorax had launched into a rambling ten-minute account of a fight at his spaceport that had happened around the same time as Gevern's and Retor's disappearances. It sounded like the most interesting thing to happen in the poor man's life.

As Kaynar listened to it, he knew he had to go there.



He recounted all of his detective work to his son on the way to Chorax. Yaga looked suitably impressed and also eager. He was a fourteen now, officially a young man, and he was still coming to realize what his uncle's death had cost his family. Kaynar feared he'd also started to realize what his father should have done but failed to do in the aftermath. Better late than never, Kaynar thought. Better some revelation and restitution for Gevern's death than a life spent living in shame.

When they docked at Chorax the stationmaster came out to meet them. The bald, bent-backed old man seemed especially excited to see two Mandalorians in full armor.

"Oh, this is a trip back to the past," the old man grinned, gap-toothed, and clasped his hands together.

"You get many Mandos in these parts?" asked Yaga.

"Mandos? Ah, *Mandalorians!*" The man's rheumy eyes opened a little wider. "No, no, not at all. I grew up here, you know. I always thought your kind were legend, like the Jedi."

"We're definitely real," said Kaynar. "So are the Jedi, for what that's worth."

"Well, we've never had a Jedi come to Chorax. At least, not that I know. But Mandalorians, yes, definitely. It's been, oh, eight years since I last saw your kind."

"That's what we're here for," said Kaynar. "I need to see your records of what happened eight years ago."

"My records?"

"Your flight manifests. Security holo-cam footage. Anything."

"Oh, my. Hmmm. I'm afraid, after so long, we don't have any of that."

"What? You told me I could see your records when we talked on the comm."

The old man tilted his head. "I did? Why would I say that? We have security cameras and the like, but it's been eight *years*. We'd have cleared those files ages ago."

Kaynar couldn't decide whether to laugh or punch the man. He didn't want to lose his composure in front of Yaga so he said, very firmly, "You *told* me you'd have them. I *remember*."

"Did I? No, I don't think I did." The stationmaster wagged his head. "However.... I *may* have said other people in town might remember. This was a big event, you understand."

Kaynar planted hands on his hips and did his best to loom over the old man. "I didn't come all this way for nothing."

The stationmaster finally seemed intimidated. "Oh, yes. Oh course. A long flight from Mandalore, I'm sure. Please, come, sit down in my office. I'll patch in some calls, see if I can't bring in someone to talk to you. Just give me a minute to think, I'm sure I can come up with.... Some names. This isn't a big town, you know."

The old man led them to his office, which was as cramped and messy as Kaynar expected. It was located in the spaceport's observation tower and while the stationmaster slinked away to make his calls Kaynar scanned the complex from the high window. The port was arranged in a honeycomb structure, which each landing pad walled off from the others. He'd heard about the Mandalorian dropship that had taken off suddenly and destroyed a second ship docked in another spot. He could see that one pad and its surrounding walls looked a little newer and cleaner than the others, almost certainly because of eight-year-old repairs.

When the stationmaster reappeared, he said an interested party was on the way and promptly began retelling the events. Yaga hadn't heard it all before, at least not told with the old man's relish, and the teenager, at least, seemed to enjoy listening. Kaynar just hoped this second witness he'd dug up had something more revelatory to say.

When that witness appeared Kaynar was instantly disappointed. The alien was no more than a meter tall, with stubby limbs, leathery blue skin, and a head topped by a stout bony crest. And Aleena, probably.

The alien pulled itself into a chair and sat at the same table as Kaynar and Yaga. It looked at their masked faces, apparently less impressed than the stationowner, then asked in slurred Basic, "Are you here about Salvoc?"

"What do you know about Salvoc?" asked Kaynar.

The Aleena's round blue eyed blinked twice. "He owned a warehouse here. Right next to mine. I thought, Mandalorian move in, it might be trouble. You people have reputation. But no. He was good neighbor."

It took a certain gall to say that the two armored warriors. Kaynar's attitude warmed a little. "You haven't seen him in eight years, right?"

"That correct. He leave same day as fight as spaceport, I think. Or die. Fight at warehouse too, but he leave that. All merchandise too."

Now they were getting somewhere. "What happened at the warehouse? Tell me."

The Aleena blinked three more times. "You want tell?"

"Yes, of course."

"Not want show?"

"Do you have a recording of what happened?"

"Yes, have got." It reached into the tunic wrapped around its stubby body and drew a small datacard from its folds.

"You kept it all this time?" asked Yaga.

"Of course," the Aleena chirped. "Very exciting thing. Why not save?"

Kaynar tilted his helm up toward the stationmaster, who'd been standing in the far corner the whole while. On sight of the Mandalorian's visor he jerked into action.

"Here, here, let me get out a holo-projector!" The old man shuffled around, checking in cabinets and messy desk drawers until he found the device and placed it in front of the Aleena. It reached out with stubby arms to insert the datacard and switch the machine on.

"This from security camera," the Aleena explained. "I have one face back of my warehouse, front of Salvoc's. You see?"

Kaynar did see. The little alien had apparently been wary of its Mando neighbors, since the camera's range centered directly on the front of the opposite warehouse, showing the wide main doors for letting in cargo and the smaller side one for personal entrances.

The Aleena pressed a button to speed through the recording. Seconds counted off at triple-speed in the corner and nothing changed until three figures appeared, all in Mandalorian armor. Now that he had something besides a drab building-face to look at Kaynar could appreciate the color depth of the recording. He made out, very clearly, a narrow figure in black armor, perhaps with blue highlights, a bigger one in green, and a third one- thinner and shorter than the others- in red with a pale body glove beneath.

The smaller door to the warehouse opened and another Mando in grey and red armor appeared. As the fourth man let the other three in, Kaynar asked, "Is that Salvoc?"

The Aleena nodded. "I do not know the other three."

Kaynar was pretty certain he did and stared, breathless, and the rest played out. The Aleena sped the clock forward almost ten minutes before things happened again. It slowed the record to one-half speed so the Mandos could both lean forward intently and examine every second. The small door opened and the girl in red armor came sprinting out firing shots behind her. Her helmet was off and long dark hair was like a streamer behind her as she ran. Two more Mandos, different from the others, raced after her. When they disappeared from view the Aleena tapped the recording forward another minute, then slowed it down again.

Kaynar watched as Salvoc and another new Mando stepped out, dragging the man in green armor by the shoulders. Then came the woman in black, unconscious and slung over the shoulder of a Mando in distinct violet that barely seemed slowed by her considerable weight.

Last out was Govern. Kaynar might not have been close to his brother but he knew that armor, dead certain. The *Mand'alor* very casually locked the door to the warehouse behind him and followed the others as they carried their unconscious captives out of the camera's range.

When the Aleena stopped the recording Yaga asked, "What happened after that?"

The little creature rattled its head from side to side; a shrug, maybe. "There was fighting at spaceport. Cannot tell you more. You not heard story?"

"I've heard the story," Kaynar said.

He could imagine the rest. Gevern took his captives back to the drop ship. If Gevern came all the way to this hole to capture these people he wouldn't have just let them go. That girl in the red- the same one from Balmorra eight years ago and the storehouse raid last week- must have escaped her pursuers and come back around to rescue them. He struggled to remember that name, then found it. Ninet Skirata.

"I need a copy of this recording," he told the Aleena.

Two blinks this time. "Do *you* know what happen next?"

All those Skiratas were alive and kicking; his brother wasn't. Yes, it was easy to figure out what had happened. And Kaynar knew, finally, what had to be done about it.

In the years since he'd last been forced to visit Soergg the Hutt's palace, Korosh Vull had believed the place's repugnant reek perfectly preserved in his memory. On return he learned that even terrible memories could fade, and reality was much worse than recollection.

He tried nonetheless to hide his distaste when in the presence of the great slug. His ship, a humble and unremarkable SoroSuub personal scout, was received with minimal fanfare. A droid unloaded the cargo crate with tightly-packed Entrallan art objects and a set of waddling Gammorean guards escorted Vull through a side gateway into the private wing of the palace. That was perfectly acceptable to him; his relationship to the Hutt was not something to be advertised, especially now that Fel's agents were probably on its scent.

Soergg received him in a spare chamber with no tables, no chairs, and five-meter long, oval pool of bubbling brown mud-water in which the Hutt was currently wallowing. When he realized he was essentially being invited into Soerrg's bath, Vull wasn't sure if he was being flattered on insulted.

"You'll forgive me if I don't join you," he said simply as he stood on the pool's edge.

Soergg, submerged halfway to his armpits in the foul-smelling muck, made a disappointing rumble before replying. Vull spoke no Huttese at all, but translation came courtesy of the room's only other occupant, a protocol droid with a standard silver-plated body and a very non-standard head. The face tapered forward into a circular snout and a row of metal spikes ran from the forehead to the back of the neck. Vull had encountered this droid on his previous visit and it had taken until the end for him to realize its metal face had been stylized to mimic a Rodian's instead of a human's.

"His Lordship extends full courtesy to his important guests. You will be allowed to change your mind later if you wish to sample some of his mineral baths." The droid's voice was without melody or intonation, brusquely mechanical even for a machine.

"I appreciate the offer, but I've never been one for spas," Vull replied.

The Hutt responded with a low chuckle that shook its bod and send ripples bouncing off the bath's walls. Vull hadn't even tried to be funny. The droid said, "His Lordship wishes to have a serious discussion about his relationship with your organization. He believes the time had some to sever our partnership."

Vull knew the slug wouldn't have called him halfway across the galaxy just to shove him off. It was an initial negotiating ploy, and an aggressive one. That was fine with Vull; coming so far to watch a bloated alien wallow in reeking muck left him feeling pretty aggressive himself.

"Being hasty will do neither of us any good," he said. "I came here to *salvage* our relationship. That's why I brought those art pieces as a sign of goodwill."

The Hutt rumbled again, slapping his tail and splashing muddy water. The droid said, "His Lordship is most displeased that you used his ship, without his permission, to commit and act of terror on Bastion."

"That was an act of *war*, the same war we've been fighting for years," Vull snapped, but he knew the Hutt didn't care about the morality of asymmetric warfare and steered back to the real subject. "We apologize for not informing you in advance. I'm here to assure that we will never use any of your ships in such attacks, ever again. If we do, you can terminate our partnership immediately. But that is not today."

The Hutt's tail twitched beneath the water. When he spoke next the droid said, "His Lordship wants to know whether explosives he provided were used in the recent bombing on Muunilist."

"No," he said truthfully. "We used the cores removed from standard-issue grenades for the Muunilist strike. It was simple but effective. You've been provided us with more sophisticated material and we've been using that to supply our warships and infantry."

The Hutt asked another question, and the Rodian-faced droid said, "The explosives used at Bastion were supplied by his Lordship, were they not?"

"Yes, of course. That ship was custom-modified to smuggle munitions past high-grade security scanners. That's why we needed it in the first place. The Restoration Front didn't have a ship of its own that could sneak past Bastion's bomb-sniffers. But I want to remind His Lordship that that's in the *past*. From now on, he has *nothing* to worry about. Fel's people won't track his shipments back to him."

The Hutt thrashed his tail again, splashing mud on Vull's boots, but he didn't back away. When the Hutt said his piece the droid translated, "His Lordship wishes to inform you that the main storehouse through which his goods were shipped to you was recently lost. All its merchandise was lost."

Taken off-guard for the first time this conversation, Vull struggled with his response. "Is there any reason to think this is because of us? Did Bastion issue a statement?"

The Hutt sounded a negative and the droid said, "The culprits behind this raid are uncertain for the moment. Efforts are underway to find them. His Lordship acknowledges that material

from other business arrangements were stored at that location and the culprits may have found it via one of them."

It sounded like thieves stealing from thieves. Vull felt relieved; Soergg was rightfully angry but the Hutt was canny enough not to let it cloud his long-term decisions. "I'm very sorry for this setback. I assure you, if Fel's people come after you, you'll know. He's not the kind to attack from the side."

The droid translated Soergg's next words and said, "In light of this unfortunate development, His Lordship suggests that a hiatus may be in order."

"A *hiatus*? Your Lordship, we need tools and weapons to repair our ships. We need *food* to feed our troops. We're relying on you for that. We're willing to pay."

The Hutt groaned, almost mournful, and the droid said, "His Lordship is currently evaluating the state of his business operations. He will make the final decision based on that."

Vull realized that, for all his rumble and bluster, the Hutt was playing a bad hand and knew it. Unfortunately, so was the Restoration Front. If Soergg couldn't supply them in the short term they'd need to look elsewhere, maybe another Hutt syndicate, though he couldn't exactly ask Soergg to recommend a competitor. It might be better to look outside the Hutts for a new supplier, even the ones who'd just stolen from Soergg.

Soergg added something else, and the droid said, "All we have discussed is tentative. The situation may change dramatically very soon depending on His Lordship's meeting with his next visitor."

"And when is this next visitor going to come?"

"He is set to arrive in less than two standard hours." The droid tilted an arm toward the Hutt's mud-pool. "Once His Lordship finishes his bath, he will be ready to receive the visitor. He insists you stay in the palace until the meeting is through, by which time he may have a much clearer idea of his business moving forward."

In other words, somebody was coming to talk about all that stolen merchandise. Probably they were going to make him an exorbitant buy-back offer, but maybe there was something else at



play. Vull didn't like it but it might be the best chance he had of keeping this partnership alive.

As he thought on the droid's words one snagged in his mind. "What did you mean by *insists*?"

The Hutt replied and the droid said, "His Lordship has placed your ship under armed guard. No one, yourself included, will be allowed to access it until His Lordship gives permission."

"You're seizing my *ship*?"

"His Lordship is merely guarding it for you. Until then, please sample the entertainments this palace has to offer. If bathing is not to your taste, other pleasures can be arranged, including ones more suitable for human males."

Vull looked at the droid's metal Rodian-like face, then at Soergg's blank, alien stare. The Hutt wanted to keep his partnership going; so did Vull. There was no reason to complain, and they wouldn't do any good anyway.

He gave the Hutt his best polite smile and said, "I accept your generous hospitality."

There were, all things considered, worse places to be trapped in. If only he could get used to the smell.

They decided everything before they left the Da Soocha system: what disguises to wear, who would accomplish which tasks, and how they planned to get off Kor Vosadii when it was all done.

To get there in the first place, most of them hitched a ride on Vedo Anjiliac's mighty Ubrikkian caravel. It was an impressive thing, over two hundred meters long with a smooth bronze hull and solar-absorbing panels that trailed behind it like red fans. Most importantly, it had enough room to fit an X-wing in its hangar compartment.

Marin, like everyone else, was itching to go the whole ride to Kor Vosadii. They'd laid out plans and backup plans in detail, both in discussion with Vedo and in private- just in case the Hutt planned a double-cross.

Marin would be working with Nat to grab Soergg's precious droid. She was happy to be working with the apprentice and he

seemed happy to work with her, and she was almost feeling optimistic about the whole thing. The only issue was Vitor. He'd be leading the other half of the mission but was still acting uncommunicative. Marin finally managed to intercept him when he was alone and tug him into one of the caravel's dim side hallways.

He pulled free and asked, "Is there something wrong?"

She crossed her arms. "I'm just wondering if you've been avoiding me."

He looked away. "Sithspawn, Marin, this isn't the time."

"Of course it's the time. This crazy plan isn't going to work if we can't get on the same wavelength. We've barely talked since Lantilles. When we were figuring out who was on what team you pretty obviously didn't want to be paired with me."

"I wanted to work with Mohrgan. He's young and needs good guidance, just like Nat."

"Come on, Vitor. At least look me in the eye when you said that."

He tried. He picked his head up, let his dark gaze flick over to hers, then looked away again.

"Fierfek, what's wrong?" Marin whispered. "Listen.... I know I've changed over the past eight years. We both have. We can't be the kids we were on Bastion again. And I know I might not be the idea of a Jedi you thought I'd been. I get that from my parents all the time, but I'm okay with it. I'm still a Jedi, the Jedi I want to be."

"That's not it," he said.

She wasn't sure if she believed him. She used to be able to read Vitor in the Force better than anybody, but he was walling himself from her and she didn't know why. "Dammit," she sighed, "When this is all done, I want explanation. Okay?"

"You'll get one."

She slapped his shoulder, extra hard. "Promise?"

He finally looked at her. "I promise," he said, then turned and slipped past her, out of the side hall, and walked quickly away.

The conversation did absolutely nothing to assure her, but there wasn't time to be anxious afterward. Everyone had to suit up and get ready, and for Marin that meant clambering into an oversized suit

of masked metal armor meant for a Krish'nor. Marin had never heard of them but Vedo had explained it was a society of Nikto warriors whose services were highly prized among Hutt kajidics and who never revealed their faces except to their employers. A little like Mandalorians, she thought, and while she'd been in a full suit of *beskar* several times this was different. The Krish'nor armor was heavier, clunkier, and built for somebody with half-again her mass. Most importantly, she'd never had to share a suit of Mando armor before.

Leegish had introduced himself as the 'best droid slicer in the galaxy under one meter tall.' She still wasn't sure if the white-furred little Squid was a member of Vedo's crime syndicate or a temporary hire, but it mattered less than the discomfort of having him squirming against her back the whole time. They'd fitted her with a sling and mounted Leegish to her back before putting the armor on, and having to deal with the Squid's body weight as well as the press of the metal plates left her struggling not to tip backward with every step.

Nat, for his part, had no passenger and thus an easier time of it. Once suited up, both of them grabbed ceremonial pikes apparently appropriate for Krish'nor and joined Vedo Anjiliac's entry procession.

Marin had heard of the ancient wealth and glories collected on the throneworlds that lay deep within Hutt Space but she'd never been to one herself. On approach the planet didn't look like much, though Hutts probably took a different view on its endless swamps and wet forests. Vedo's caravel set down on a broad landing field outside a collection of drum-shaped towers that marked Soergg Vosadii's palace. The caravel's ventral landing ramp was big enough to slide an X-wing down, or march a parade through. Vedo had the latter in mind: Marin counted fifty armored alien soldiers, all with the symbol of the Anjiliac kajidic branded on their armor. Some carried blasters but most lifted colorful banners or pikes like the ones Marin and Nat held.

They'd been placed at the center of the procession aboard Vedo's repulsor-sled, which thankfully spared them from having to

march in the awkward armor. Vedo had also placed two Klatooinans with heavy rifles on the sled, plus a pair of Zeltron serving-girls whose outfits left plenty of pink skin on show. They waved broad feathered fans and stirred muggy air around the Hutt's broad head as the repulsor-sled moved them across the landing field toward the palace.

It was a pretty grand entrance, but the greeting party was even larger. Viewed through the narrow horizontal slice her helmet's visor, Marin saw about a hundred palace guards that had been brought out. Less of them were armed with rifles than she imagined; most hefted banners or pikes instead. She'd heard that outright violence between kajidics was rare in Hutt Space and outright taboo on throneworlds like this. The Hutts had reputations as lawless gangsters in the rest of the galaxy but that wasn't entirely accurate; they were a people who made up their own rules, obeyed them scrupulously, and held everyone else's in contempt.

Well, maybe not that scrupulously, given this heist scheme they'd concocted.

When the two parties stopped to face off, Vosadii guards raised banners in salute, and the Anjiliac did the same. Then the Vosadii columns parted to either side, creating an open lane through which to pass. A great door at the base of the palace's largest tower opened and the procession began to pass through. When the shadowed entrance swallowed Vedo's repulsorsled it took Marin's eyes a second to adjust to the darkness.

"Where are we, Jedi?" a little whisper echoed inside her armor. "I can't see a thing."

"Not much to see," Marin whispered back. "We just went inside the palace."

"Did we get to the main room yet?"

"No. We're in a hallway."

She felt Leegish squirm against her back, but he didn't say anything else. As they moved through the broad tunnel she reached out with the Force, felt Nat right beside her, felt Vitor further back, still on the caravel. According to Vedo the welcome ceremony would be a long one and wouldn't finish until the palace got

swallowed by night, which would make Vitor's job a hell of a lot easier. For now, the Prince of the Empire had nothing to do but wait.

When they reached the main chamber Marin couldn't help but be impressed. The great drum-shaped room rose high and must have taken up half of the palace's interior. Long shimmersilk banners stretched in layers high overhead, golden chandeliers dangled low from the distant ceiling, and a set of colorfully-lit fountains ringed a raised circular platform in the center. As she watched jets of water leap from one pool to another, Vedo's guards broke off to line the chamber walls and the Hutt's repulsor-sled pressed ahead, along the curving edge, toward the high dais opposite the entrance. Waiting for them was a great green body of Soergg Vosadii with a repulsor-sled and guard complement of his own. And, Marin noted, a protocol droid with a snout-faced silver head that vaguely recalled a Rodian's rather than a human's. Just like Vedo had promises.

Marin turned her attention to the rest of the chamber. In addition to all the ceremonial guards they'd acquired an audience, mostly gathered on the tiered balconies that ringed the outer walls five layers high. Employees, admirers, or hangers-on, she didn't know who they were, but it didn't really matter. She scoured the floor of the great chamber and spotted what she'd hoped for. Vedo had explained that, on occasion, the floor of this great audience chamber was flooded and turned into a giant mud-pool for Hutts to bathe in. There were drainage grates scattered across the floor, closed at this time but visible for their faint metallic sheen compared to the rougher stone surface of the other tiles. As Vedo's sled wheeled around and climbed the dais to sit beside Soergg's she marked one not two meters away. Perfect.

She sent Nat a pulse of encouragement in the Force, then settled down to wait.

Soergg boomed a warm welcome for his fellow kajidic, and Vedo returned one in kind. Marin's Huttese was pretty good and next she made out Soergg's announcement that eating and entertainment would commence.

It did at that. As a set of Rodian slave-girls pushed to food-carts in front of Soerrg and Vedo, the lights in the rest of the chamber went dim except for the bright ones on the central stage. Music started playing from somewhere unseen and a set of female dancers scrambled onto the stage. Marin marked humans, Twi'lek, Togruta, and a few other species, and they began a series of impressive acrobatics in time to the music and the long translucent ribbons of their outfits whirled like spiral streamers. All the while, the two Hutts gorged themselves on still-squirming food.

"From a guy who doesn't even like Vedo, this is one hell of a welcome," whispered Marin.

"Soerrg's not just throwing party," Leegish muttered from her back. "He's showing off. Don't you know anything about Hutts?"

"Sorry, first time working with one."

She understood what Vedo'd said about this taking a long time. One dancing troupe moved switched out with another and the when that song was done they switched out with a third, and then it went back to the first. The Rodian girls brought out a second set of food-carts which the Hutts promptly set to consuming. All this before Soerrg and Vedo retired to someplace more private to hack out a deal regarding the merchandise stolen from Lantilles. Marin supposed that, for beings who lived a thousand standard years, a couple hours' wait was nothing.

An intermission came after two full rounds of Soerrg's dancers. Vedo's two Zeltrons alighted his sled, pranced down the dais and across the main floor, then hopped onto the stage for a performance of their own. The pair put on an impressive show, and when they were done they took bows to thunderous applause from the audience in the upper tiers. Their outfits didn't have much room for hiding things, but as they scampered off the stage and out of the light, those Zeltrons managed to drop a few remote-trigger smoke capsules out of their rustling skirts and onto the floor, then casually knocked them into unseen corners with their bare feet.

Inside this great drum chamber there were no natural lights to mark the passing of time, but Marin's stomach had started to growl,

her back and shoulders ached, and she felt tired enough to drop when Vitor finally touched her mind.

Once that touch had been clear, simple, and easy enough to pass whole words and phrases between them. That was a long time ago and they were no longer in sync, but Vitor's message was unmistakable: They were moving out.

Which meant it wouldn't be long now.

When darkness fully fell over Soergg Vosadii's palace, Vitor and Mohrgan slipped out from a hatch halfway up the caravel's tall bronze hull and dropped, Force-assisted and softly, onto the landing pad. While most of Soergg's guards had gone inside to watch the big show a few remained by the central gates. Vitor could sense their minds in the Force: bored, tried, and getting sleepy now that it was night. As he and Mohrgan scampered toward the palace he kept touching their minds, encouraging the sloth already there.

They didn't charge the gates, of course. They stayed well clear of the guards and the big door and instead began the hard work of climbing the steep smooth exterior of the palace walls. The Force was their friend here, smoothing their ascent, but even better were the high-quality long-range grappling guns they'd brought with them from Bastion. Magnetic-clamp boots and a touch of the Force held Vitor and Mohrgan in place as they climbed to the top of Soergg's palace. Once they reached the conical roof's shallow slant, they scampered under the faint moonlight to the place Vedo had told them to go.

His heart was beating fast from the exertion and from fear he tried to keep from bleeding out to his young cousin. That moment he'd dreamed, his final moment, was as clear as his mind's eye as it had been when he'd first woken from it. Clearer, now that Marin was close. He didn't remember *where* that vision had been set, what the surrounding area had looked like. He didn't think any vicious Sith Lord was skulking around in a Hutt's palace but he couldn't be sure of anything except the fate looming ahead for him.

The uncertainty of everything else made knowledge of his death all the worse. It filled him with nagging, constant paranoia. He'd

barely been able to sleep since. When he lay down he was always too afraid the next day would be his last.

He tried, very hard, to push that all away and focus on the situation around him. Vedo had instructed them on the location of Soergg's private art collection within the palace's main drum tower and had recommended they reel off the rooftop disc from a point approximately two-hundred and twenty degrees from the landing pad. Vitor paused near the top of the roof's cone, found the proper heading, and led Mohrgan down the slope to the rooftop's edge to the spot from which they'd drop.

It wasn't, overall, much different from infiltration missions Vitor had been on as an Imperial Knight. Still, he couldn't forget that on this mission he was, essentially, an art thief.

They affixed the claws of their grapples on the tip of the overhang and lowered themselves down. The palace's curving walls were smooth and blank, with no apparent windows, but Vedo had explained that the art room was shielded by armor-thick plates that, once retracted, let natural light shine through transparisteel windows onto Soergg's impressive collection of art-glass.

The night's dark stole all color away, but the movable plates were just barely visible for their thickness. Mohrgan and Vitor slid down, holding their grapple guns with both hands, until they could plant the tips of their boots where the bottom seam of the armor-plates bulged just past flush with the curve of the outer walls.

"Cut very carefully," Vitor warned his cousin as Mohrgan released one hand from the grapple and removed his lightsaber. "Armor first, then window."

The younger Knight nodded and thumbed this long white blade on. Holding himself awkwardly away from the plate, so the tip melted very gently through the layered armor, Mohrgan pressed slowly and carefully until he was sure he'd cut through the plate without hitting the transparisteel. Then, even more awkwardly, he moved his saber-tip in a broad circle, always cutting at the exact same depth.

When he'd cut a full circle, slightly less than a meter in diameter, Mohrgan shut off the saber, hooked it to his belt, and



went back to holding the grappler with both hands. He and Vitor hung awkwardly, dangling by their aching arms with boots pressed right against the wall. They reached out with the Force together and, with a handless touch, pulled the circular section of the armor plate out from the rest. They lifted it high, raised it all the way up to the roof, tipped it past the edge and lay it down to rest on the shallow cone as gently as they could.

Then they turned their attention to what lay past the carved portal. Moonlight added a faint sheen to the transparisteel window but the chamber inside was black. Vitor took one hand off the grappler and fished out small glowlamp. Using his legs, he pulled himself close to the portal and shone the light through. He examined the texture of the transparisteel- three inches thick, he'd guess- and the room beyond. He passed his constricted disc of light over one art object, then another and another, mostly sculptures from societies he'd never heard of made from material he didn't recognize. Vitor knew nothing about art but Vedo had suggested he look for something that sounded easy to recognize: a spiral vase made of red glass forged from the sands of some iron-rich beach on Alderaan's southern continent. According to Vedo, Soergg had acquired it illegally during the Clone Wars and, given that there was no more beach and no more Alderaan, it would fetch quite a price on the black arts market.

Vitor had to get so close to the window his breath fogged it surface. He swung his light at odd angles before he could spot the vase. Then he pulled back and handed the glowlamp to Mohrgan.

"Look far to the right. It's got a pedestal of its own. See it?"

Mohrgan took the lamp, pulled in close, and looked through. "I see it."

"Good. Get ready to grab it."

Still dangling by one arm, Vitor took out his lightsaber. Vedo had warned him that the transparisteel windows were probably wired with sensors set to sound alarms if they detected vibrations stronger than those of a strong wind-gust. He turned on his saber and dipped its tip carefully through the window. No alarm went off that they could hear. Vitor shut off his saber and used the Force to

tap out the transparisteel disc, as gently as possible, and raise it up to the rooftop to join the armor plate.

"I think we're okay," Mohrgan whispered. "I don't think we set off anything."

"Can you get a hold of that vase?"

Mohrgan closed his eyes, reached out with the Force, and whispered, "I've got it."

Vitor called on the Force too. He reached out, touched Marin's mind, and passed her a wordless warning. Then he reached further to a mind more distant, but one he knew so much better. He found his brother in the Force and gave Roan the same nudge.

Then he whispered, "Do it."

There was no sound, not even the soft scrape of the vase kicking off from its pedestal. The swirl of red glass as tall as Vitor's forearm floated carefully through the hole in the window and into Mohrgan's waiting hand. He clutched it carefully against his chest and said, "Are we good?"

"Go on. I'll be right up."

Mohrgan kicked off from the wall, tapped his grappler, and rose smoothly up. Vitor delayed ascent for just a moment. He fished out one more object, a tiny low-yield explosive charge, set its thirty-second timer, and placed it against the transparisteel.

Vitor had just pulled himself over the roof's edge when he heard the window shatter below. If that didn't set off the alarms, nothing would.

And now that they'd gotten Soergg's attention, Marin and Nat could do what they're *really* come here to do.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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From a distance Orelon VI, with its swirling red and brown gases, looked like a beacon of warmth against the cool blue dust-clouds of the Transitory Mists. The illusion hinted a touch of truth; inside remained the last sanctuary for the Hapan loyalists in a star cluster that had turned cold and deadly against them.

Darth Terrid could see less than half the gas giant past the soft black curve of the moon his Fury starfighter was hiding behind. The loyalist station itself was submerged inside the upper atmosphere on the other side of the planet and there was no obvious danger of being spotted, but Terrid and the two dozen other Sith Lords with him kept their starfighters close to the moon's barren surface, in case loyalists ships were still lurking in the Mists that closed around to the Orelon system.

Coming with the starfighters had been the lynchpin to their entire plan: Darth Kheykid's *Intruder*. The black flying wing, a marvel of stealth technology, would be able to sneak close to the loyalist station, slip beneath the highest cloud layer, and board that station. Once inside, its shields would be disabled and Admiral Vahl's waiting fleet of Battle Dragons and Nova Cruisers would arrive.

Vahl had precise orders passed on by Darth Saydel herself. Once the shields were down she would allow a very short window of time to pass, enough for a handful of Sith Lords aligned with Terrid to flee the station on *Intruder*, then blast it to atoms, killing every loyalist and unhappy Sith left aboard. At the same time her Miy'til fighters would launch in wings and target every Fury fighter that failed to emit a beacon signal Terrid had shared with his allies.

In a matter of minutes, every loyalist and every Sith Lord not fortunate enough for Terrid's favor would be eliminated.

But that was not now. *Intruder* had just curved around the moon and was gliding invisibly toward the planet. It would take at least ten standard minutes for *Intruder* to reach that station and, by Terrid's estimate based on old schematics, another ten to disable the shields.

He'd told Saydel he'd be aboard that ship and said the same to Wyyrlok, Maleth, even Inexor and the other Sith aboard he trusted, only to announce last-minute that he'd remain aboard his Fury. Vahl knew nothing of this switch and if the admiral had been ordered by her queen to destroy the station right away, before any Sith escaped at all, the betrayal wouldn't catch Terrid. The Chiss still believed he and Saydel could work together for now, but even when acting boldly, a touch of caution didn't hurt.

Victory, betrayal, or a combination thereof waited ahead. All Terrid could do now was sit in his cockpit and wait.

Darth Terrid's last-minute retreat from the boarding party left Darth Kroan feeling not just wary, but disappointed. The Chiss had sold their pact on his purported boldness, his desire to take the fight to the Jedi instead of sulking on Shedu Maad for decades, awaiting Darth Krayt's waking. He suspected Terrid's main motivation wasn't cowardice but canny pragmatism. The boarding team faced the most danger in this mission and Terrid didn't want to risk death so close to the fruit of all his labor. Understandable, but disappointing.

Darth Kheykid didn't know the nature of the trap he was walking into, but Kroan suspected the inscrutable reptile wouldn't

show anxiety if he did. The Barabel had guided his ship slowly on directional repulsor-bursts that wouldn't attract attention from the loyalists' security sensors until Orelon VI filled the viewport. Now he'd angled *Intruder* toward the gas giant and was letting it be pulled by natural gravity on a steep but smooth fall toward a station still invisible beneath the clouds.

Kroan was a man with former expertise in starship construction and he still marveled at *Intruder*. Kuati researchers had looked into developing stealth technology but had never produced anything like this. He'd asked Kheykid once where he'd acquired such a ship and Barabel had demurred, saying that he'd been gifted it from his master and did not know who'd made it. Apparently its secrets had died with Darth Xoran, which was a pity. Kroan would have felt more confident with this mission if they'd had more ships and more Sith Lords instead of the mere eight they'd managed to cram inside *Intruder*.

*Intruder* dipped into the atmosphere and the viewport filled with washes of formless warm-colored gas. Strong winds began to buffet the ship. Darth Kheykid still seemed unmoved, and when Kroan reached out with the Force to sense the other Sith in the small hold behind them he felt nothing but cool determination and a stirring hunger. He felt the same from Darth Inexor and Darth Morlid, who were a part of Terrid's design, as he did from Ruyn, Vurik, and the others who were not.

Their arrival at the station was sudden: the gas-drifts disappeared without warning and then there was nothing but a blank metal bulkhead in front of them. Kheykid didn't seem surprised by that either; he angled *Intruder* so it crawled just meters above the surface of the station, until they spotted the round portal of an emergency docking mouth. Kheykid maneuvered *Intruder* to place its ventral airlock directly over the port, then magnetically locked the ship to the station hull.

"We are ready," the Barabel announced succinctly and removed himself from the pilot's seat.

He and Kroan slipped back to the hold where six more Sith Lords were ready. They were a motley mix of species, most with

tattoos on their faces marking them as born One Sith but a few—Kroan himself, four-armed Inexor, a Duros named Darth Heyd—were not. All were dressed in night-black robes with armored bodysuits underneath and most clasped unlit lightsaber in their hands.

When Kheykid opened the cabin the Sith filed eagerly through the airlock. The Barabel went first, followed by Inexor, while Kroan and Darth Morlid, the group's other human, took the rear. There was no one waiting for them in the entry hallway but they'd not expected there to be. This was an auxiliary airlock used only in emergencies, and while there were no guards around, the Sith scouring the area quickly spotted a few holocam emplacements bulging from small domes on the ceiling. There was no way of knowing if they even worked now, but no point in taking risks either. It took only a short burst of Force energy to crush each camera one-by-one until there was no chance of foreign eyes watching them.

"We will go ahead and locate the shield generators," Kheykid told them. Wyyrlok had anointed him leader of the expedition. "First we will spread out and find a station computer to guide us."

"At least one of us should remain to watch the ship," Darth Kroan said.

"Agreed," added Inexor.

"Very well. Darth Kroan, will you stay?"

He hadn't expected the Barabel to make it to so easy for him. "I'll defend it for you."

The Barabel made a faint, unreadable hissing sound. "Darth Heyd, you will stay as well."

Not so easy, then. The hope was for Inexor and Morlid to also escape this trap Terrid had set. They could still endure intentional injuries and use them as reason for retreat; it was not an ideal option but preferable to protesting and arousing suspicion. As for Heyd, Terrid had determined he'd been too indoctrinated by Wyyrlok and would have to be eliminated. That job, apparently, had just fallen to Kroan

Because the order had been given, the human and the Duros retreated to the guard the airlock portal while the six other Sith filed ahead. Once they'd passed out of the chamber, deeper inside the old station's bowels, Heyd looked to Kroan and said, "I thought you'd be more eager to fight the enemy directly."

That was too much irony too early in the mission. With a straight face Kroan said, "Lord Heyd, the day is just getting started."

Jade Skywalker had just started forming a mental map of this station's endless narrow, utilitarian passageways, and though she was able to move around some sections without needing a guide the place still felt claustrophobic and lifeless. The thousands of people hiding in this place had been doing so for years and on some level they must have gotten used to living their lives effectively underground. Jade wasn't sure if that was better or worse than feeling oppressed by the place. Before coming here it had frankly been a challenge to feel empathy for the people who had, on some level, been accessories to the murder of her mother. Now she'd started to pity them.

She was making her way alone through those corridors to a meeting with Tanith, Reshul, and the other Duchas about organizing the mass evacuation the nobles had grudgingly accepted. She was almost there when she stopped in her tracks and felt a chill run through her body. She'd felt tremors or foreboding in the Force before and knew it for what it was, but something about this felt different; stronger, immediate. She closed her eyes, stood still in the empty hallway, and stretched out to sense her surroundings. She felt a few beings distinctly: Tanith, the other Jedi who'd come, Ducha Reshul, the Chalk siblings whose Force potential was beyond doubt. Otherwise she could feel only a burgeoning mass of uncounted people, tired yet anxious, aware that they might finally escape this lifeless prison but uncertain on everything else.

And beyond all that there was something distant and faint, a mind she'd probably not be able to sense if it wasn't horribly familiar.

She recoiled at the hint of it, but the hint was enough. Darth Terrid- whom she'd called friend so long ago as Ran'wharn'csapla- was somewhere nearby, and if he was nearby then the Sith were nearby and Queen Serissa's fleet was too.

She grabbed her commlink but paused before she hailed Tanith. She recalled what the Chalks had said about Reboam, how the Sith had marked an advance force that had softened the base's defenses and killed its senior nobles before the Hapans in orbit had launched its full attack. If a fleet had appeared over Orelon the whole station would be sounding alarms, which meant right here, right now, they were dealing with a Sith infiltration team.

She also knew that the Reboam base, smaller and more paltry, hadn't had anything to defend itself. This station, by contrast, had been fitted with military-grade shields that could take heavy orbital bombardment for hours.

If the Sith infiltrators were going anyplace first, it would be the shield generators.

So, knowing what had to be done, Jade turned on the comlink and made her call.

With a flick of two wrists and twin flashes of red, Darth Inexor snipped heads from shoulders and dropped both guards before they could sound the alarm. Darth Kheykid was right behind him and the other Sith behind Kheykid. So far they'd managed to progress through a large section of the station without bringing its soldier complement down on their heads, though it was only a matter of time before mute guards or a discovered body announced their arrival.

To Kheykid it mattered little. He glanced at Darth Morlid and asked, "How much further to the shield generator?"

The human had accessed a computer console three sections back and burned the station's layout map into memory. "Just two more doors ahead."

"The guards will be thicker there," commented Inexor. Red sabers still burned in his two upper hands but the weapons in his lower ones were dormant. When full battle came Inexor would turn



into a cyclone of deadly blades. Even Kheykid, with his hunter's fast reflexes and bone-breaking tail, didn't know if he could best the Codru-Ji in combat.

"Darth Morlid, lead the way," the Barabel commanded.

The human assented and hurried down the corridor. She placed her hand on the door, sensing if there were beings beyond. Kheykid felt none and neither did Morlid. She simply tapped the door's controls to slide it open. After so long staying hidden on this station, the Hapan loyalists had let inside security grow lax; the Sith had needed force their way through only one locked passage to get here.

It was another long empty corridor to the shield generator control room. Morlid wisely paused before stepping inside and used the Force to crush the single holocam nestled above the far door. The Sith progressed after her and this time faced no opposition.

Morlid examined the next door and said, "This one is sealed."

"As expected," hissed Kheykid. "Can you sense the minds inside?"

The woman closed her eyes. "They are... calm. Still."

Kheykid felt the same. These loyalists truly had grown soft, not to have sounded a full-scale alarm by now. "Wrench the door open," he commanded.

"With pleasure," hissed Morlid, and she joined Kheykid in mentally grabbing hold of the locked portal and forcing it to slide clear, revealing the tiered octagonal chamber through which the generator's power supply column ran, ringed by control consoles.

He saw the machinery but no crew and knew something was wrong. Before he could open his jaws he saw something small drop in from above the door, then change direction in midair and leap into the hallway.

Morlid was closer and moved fast. She batted the device back through the doorway right before the flash grenade burst with blinding light. She and Kheykid were too near and their vision was blasted with lingering light. He felt a tremor of shock behind them as a stronger blast rocked the corridor. At the same moment he felt

a life suddenly wink out and knew Darth Greshalk must have been killed in the explosion.

They were trapped from both ends but Kheykid had the presence of mind to turn his armor-plated back to the control room just before laserfire resounded from both directions. As vision returned, too slowly, he heard a new sound join in: the distinctive snap and hiss of igniting lightsabers. He counted them off: one, two, three, four in the generator room. Five, six, seven from the other side.

He didn't know how the Jedi had gotten here, only that the trap had been snared and they had no choice but to fight. His vision was still clearing but even debilitated it wasn't difficult to make sense of the shifting shapes. Looking ahead he saw Darth Morlid clashing her red blade against a blue one; beyond, more Jedi were charging in from the generator control room.

Kheykid ignited the short lightsaber blades mounted over his wrists and dove forward, head bent and tail high to take the Jedi low. Even as he moved, he felt another faster body whip past his and heard the harmony of four lightsaber blades moving as one.

First things first: Kheykid slipped in beside the Jedi fighting Darth Morlid and thrust his right blade upward into the woman's ribcage. She released only a faint gasp and dropped her blade; then Morlid took off her head.

His vision was clearing. They both turned and saw Darth Inexor blazing thorough the threshold and into the control room. His four blades cut apart one Jedi in a flurry of horizontal swipes and the other two, both human females, jumped back in fright. At the same time laserfire fell down like hail from above, probably Hapan guards on the upper tiers, and even Inexor struggled to block them all with his flashing blades. Morlid sensed this and fearlessly rushed in to help.

Kheykid glanced behind him and saw Darth Vurik and Darth Ruyn struggling to hold back the three Jedi on the other end of the hall. He wordlessly called them to follow him into the control room. It might be hard to escape from, but five Sith would make short work of the shield generator and that was their main objective.

Then he charged into the fray, but instead of trying to defend himself like Morlid and Inexor, Kheykid sprung up and used the Force to pull himself onto the next tier ringing the power supply column. The Hapan guards pressed against its railing- he counted over a dozen- immediately moved to counter him. He flashed both blades to block as many shots as he could but there were too many, even for him. They pounded his body-armor and one singed his naked tail, sending hot pain through his whole body.

Pain was a tool; any Sith knew that. Kheykid shut off his blades, dropped to all fours, and bounded across the catwalk. His new posture shocked the guards and the ones on the opposite side of the ring struggled to track the low target. Kheykid rammed into the nearest woman, crushing her with the weight of impact, and immediately scampered to the next one. Laserblasts pounded harmlessly on his lower back and when he cracked his tail, shattering the guard's legs at the knee, more pain shot through body.

Pain and the frantic energy of chaotic combat was what he needed. Slashing and biting, flicking on his sabers long enough to cut off limbs or spear his enemies through the gut, Kheykid worked his way around the entirety of the chamber until every guard was dead. He stood straight and looked down past the railing just in time to see that last Jedi in the chamber fall. He sensed the remaining three in the corridor through which they'd come, and the arrival of a bristling, angry squad of Hapan guards behind them.

None of it mattered. Darth Ruyn was already at the control consoles and the tattooed young Twi'lek's hands moved swiftly to shut down the shields. As soon as he was done Inexor stepped in his place and, with a short storm of lightsaber-slashes, destroyed the console beyond anyone's ability to operate. At the same time Vurik and Morlid made quick, precise slashes at the surrounding machinery. The faint rattle of energy through the central power conduit creaked and went silent.

That was when the Hapan guards standing in the entry corridor raised their guns and opened fire. Some Sith used their sabers as

shields and others hurried out of firing range. Kheykid started to scan the upper tiers for another door through which to exit when he felt Darth Maleth's familiar, calming presence suddenly within his mind. If the battle meld was joined then Maleth was in-system and so was Admiral Vahl's fleet, which meant the remaining Jedi and guards were too late to change their fates.

Everything was going according to plan.

Darth Terrid had felt the alarm emanating from the Sith aboard the station when they finally joined in battle, which in turn sent ripples of shock through the Lords waiting in their Furies at Orelon VI's moon. Kheykid, Inexor, and the others were not just battling Hapan guards. They'd encountered Jedi. That might change everything, it might not. It was impossible to guess because Hapan loyalists *despised* Jedi; this alliance was totally unpredictable.

Yet even as he sat in his starfighter, thousands and miles away and helpless to affect the battle's outcome, Terrid felt a growing confidence replace the team's initial panic. Perhaps there were too few Jedi or perhaps they came too late. When the station's shield generator shuddered and died he knew none of it mattered at all.

He felt Darth Maleth's presence touch their minds a second before Admiral Vahl's fleet reverted to realspace. The Orelon system, much like Shedu Maad, was tucked in a safe pocket surrounded by the Transitory Mists, and there was only one vector an attack could come from. Terrid narrowed his eyes to spot the faint glint of approaching Battle Dragons as his sensors reported nearly a dozen of the large warships and even more support cruisers and frigates. It was a mighty force and it would be in position to destroy the unshielded station in less than eight standard minutes.

The loyalists had surely been taken off guard, but even then they managed to react quickly. From their hiding spot behind the moon, the Sith in their Furies had an excellent place to watch as the loyalists' scant remaining warships emerged from the sensor-jamming swirls of the surrounding Mists. A collection of older warships, none larger than a Nova cruiser, they peeked their noses out from the veils of stellar dust and boldly micro-jumped from the

system's edge right into Orelon VI's gravity well. The ships began to form up in low orbit over the wounded station, as though they could delay Admiral Vahl's fleet for more than a few minutes. It was the kind of selflessly noble gesture Terrid rarely saw from Hapans, but there was nothing to admire in futility.

He tapped on his fighter's comlink and hailed the other Furies. "All ships, the time has come. Follow my lead."

He kicked this Furies' sublight thrusters on and set course for the nearest loyalist ship. The other Sith followed as they soared out from behind the moon and raced toward a frigate from behind. The ship had turned to face the approaching fleet and had shunted power to its forward shields, a fatal mistake.

The Sith starfighters didn't carry the payloads of heavy bombers but they didn't need to. Long ago he'd heard of a trick the Jedi had used to battle the Yuuzhan Vong and other enemies subsequently. They'd removed thrusters and guidance from each warhead case, replacing them with more explosives, and instead used the Force to hurl each missile or torpedo at their targets, confounding the missile-tracking systems on enemy ships. The Jedi had called these devices 'shadow bombs'- an unconscious admission, Terrid thought, that there was little bright or noble about the tricky, extra-lethal weapons.

By the time the frigate picked up the thrust of the approaching starfighters and put power back into its aft shields, the Sith had already released their shadow bombs and scattered formation. The frigate was unable to prevent the series of great explosions that ruptured through its aft section, tore through its power core, and sparked an even larger fireball that consumed half the ship.

The thrill of vicious triumph spread through Terrid's battle group, aided in no small part by Darth Maleth's mind-meld. Maleth and his meld wouldn't last much longer but Terrid didn't let himself think about that. Instead he called on his fighters to rejoin formation behind him and seek out the next target.

That was when his sensor board lit up, reporting new arrivals, many of them. At first his computer didn't even know what to make

of them, and a sinking feeling told him the loyalists has brought out a full fleet of secret warships.

When his sensors finally decided he sank further. The ships out there- numbering twice as many as Admiral Vahl's fleet- were broadcasting the identification sigil of the Galactic Alliance.

Allana stood on the bridge of the Alliance warship *Bright Union*, close to the communications station but just out of the holo-transmitter's viewing range as Admiral Lekwash made connection with his Hapan counterpart. The Quarren stood stiff and proud, hands clasped behind his back, and faced the image of an equally dignified human woman as it sprung to life.

"My name is Admiral Lekwash, commander of the Galactic Alliance Second Fleet. We request you stand down immediately and let us pass to Orelon VI."

"You have no authority here! This is an invasion of our sovereign territory!" snapped the Hapan admiral. The woman was older than Allana and she wracked her memory to attach a name to the half-familiar face.

"Out intervention has been formally requested by the people located Orelon VI. This is a mission of mercy that had been officially sanctioned by the Alliance government. We will send you our written orders now." Lekwash waved a finger at the comm lieutenant to transmit the data package.

"The only legal authority in this space belongs to Queen Serissa Lohr," the Hapan said. Admiral Vahl, Allana recalled. "Turn back or you will be fired upon."

"We seek no conflict with your Queen. We will evacuate the people at Orelon VI and then we will leave Hapan space and never bother you again."

"That is unacceptable. We will not be bullied. This is an act of war."

"War is the last thing any of us want. Please, you've seen our fleet strength compared to yours. There's no need for anyone else to die today. Now move aside."

Vahl's face twisted in a scowl, and just when it looked like she was going to snap another retort she killed the signal instead. Lekwash wilted with released breath and turned to Allana.

"This had better work," he growled, face-tentacles twitching in agitation.

Allana didn't blame him for being angry; if anything, she was impressed by his bravery in charging into the system as soon as their recon flights spotted the arrival of Vahl's fleet. He'd brought the entire Alliance task force with them as a show of force, even though most crews had been hours away from battle-readiness and he could just as easily scuttled the mission and jumped back to Alliance space. Lekwash had risen to admiral after she'd left the government but Senator Avic had vouched for him as the Quarren for the job, and so far he'd performed impressively.

Allana wished she could assure him that yes, Vahl would back down, but she just didn't know. She reached out with the Force to sense Jade but all she found were feelings vague, anxious, perhaps angry. It was nothing to encourage her and she kept it to herself.

As Lekwash turned to watch the tactical holo, hush whispers rippled across *Bright Union's* bridge. Allana looked at the display and saw the Hapan fleet begin to part formation right down the middle. They were leaving a narrow passage for the Alliance ships to get through but a passage all the same.

"Admiral," reported the comm lieutenant, "The Hapan flagship has told us to we can go ahead."

Allana stepped beside Lekwash. "It might be a trap."

"I'm aware, but now that we've come this far it seems to be our only option." The admiral raised his voice. "Tactical, order the first battle team to move ahead, very carefully. Move the first three transports in after them. Shields up, red alert, guns ready. No one lets their guard down until we're back in Alliance space."

The crew snapped to comply. Beneath their professional comport Allana could sense mounting anxiety and wished she had a way to soothe it, but first she'd need something to calm herself, and she saw none of that ahead.

They'd rushed to get there as quickly as they could but it hadn't been enough. The other Jedi had acted immediately on Jade's request and Tanith had sent her small complement of guards to the shield generator control chamber, but the Duchas had balked at a Jedi's warning against a threat they couldn't see. A full contingent of troops arrived once the Sith had already breached the chamber, eliminated all Tanith's guards, and killed the four Jedi inside. After that there was no stopping them.

As soon as the Sith did their damage they fled upward, using the Force to ascend to the chamber's higher tiers. The loyalist troops rushed into the slashed-apart, smoking chamber and pumped laserfire upward to no avail. When Jade joined them she could see that the Sith had already escaped from sight.

She lurched to the woman with the most bars on her uniform and grabbed her shoulder. "They're gone. Which way could they go from up there?"

The frowning woman jerked herself free, pulled out her commlink, and plainly ignoring the Jedi said, "This is Major Orix. We've lost them. Send troops to Sections A3 and A8." She listened to a tinny voice and added, "We're beginning damage assessment. Situation looks critical. Stand by."

The major pocketed her calm and began barking orders to her troops. As the Hapan women began scouring the chamber another grabbed Jade by the arm and pulled her into the battle-scarred corridor through which they'd come.

"They won't listen to us, don't even try," said the gold-haired Jedi, Ceynar Valiss.

"She's right," added the other surviving knight, dark-skinned Leena Balm. "If they knocked out the shields you know what's next."

They were both right. Jade had been left in a daze by the hurried rush here, the messy fight with the Sith, and fast death of four Jedi she'd dragged into what she'd known from the start would be a mess.

Recriminations were for later. Jade took out own commlink and hailed Tanith. When the woman responded her voice was so thick



with panic she barely recognized it. "Jade, where are you? You need to get up to the access level immediately!"

"What happened? Are there ships out there?"

"A Hapan fleet just showed up- *and* an Alliance one!"

Jade spun and hurried down the hall, away from the control chamber. Valiss and Balm were right behind her. "Is it Allana?"

"Yes, she just transmitted now."

"Have they started shooting?"

"No. It looks like the Hapan fleet's giving them room to approach."

"And they *not* shooting?"

"Not yet."

Jade badly wanted to believe it. "It still seems like a trap."

"They don't have a choice besides fighting their way through, and the Alliance isn't going to start a war for us. There's no other paths in and out of this system."

"I know. Are you prepping people for evacuation?"

"We just sounded the order. It's going to be a stampede to get to the access level and into the ships. That's why we need you here."

"We lost four Jedi. Those Sith are still on the loose."

"I'm sorry, but please, we need your help evacuating." Jade could hear Tanith's wince. "We won't be able to waste time once the Alliance gets here."

*If* they got there. Jade spotted the turbolift ahead, then glanced back at the two Jedi still close behind her. There was no way the three of them could stop those surviving Sith. The warrior with four arms and four blades looked unstoppable and she was nigh-certain that black-and-red Barabel was the same one she'd met during the hunt for Abeloth.

That was all bad enough; worse was the knowledge that Darth Terrid was still somewhere out there, separate from those others and all the more dangerous because of it. She didn't dare reach out with the Force to find him, not when there was so much else to do.

As she slammed the button to call the lift Jade said, "Tanith, I understand. We'll be there as soon as we can."

Saving lives was the most Jedi thing to do in a crisis, she told herself, and hoped she wouldn't regret her choice. When the lift tube arrived the three women stepped inside and began a shaky, clanking ride through the old tube up toward the top of the station. She could feel the collective terror from thousands of people clamoring for ships that might not even come, and her gut or the Force told her the ships Allana had brought wouldn't be enough.

She thought of one thing that could help. Tucked away in one of the station's private hangars, *Jade Shadow* would be inaccessible for the crushing crowd, but she'd set up her personal comlink to patch into the ship's long-range transmitter. When the door slid open Jade joined Valiss and Balm in hurrying down the hall, but she lingered a little behind them, walking slower so she could concentrate on sending one last cry for help.

When Admiral Vahl broadcast her order for all ships to hold their fire and let the Alliance fleet pass, it had accompanied by a stern mental command from Darth Maleth for all Sith warriors to do the same.

On a blood-high after destroying the loyalist frigate, Terrid's first instinct had been to ignore it and keep fighting. Then reason took hold and he held his fire, instead joining formation with the other Furies and taking position in the space between the loyalist ships and the vanguard of Admiral Vahl's forces.

He'd planned for betrayals and surprises but nothing like this, and he had no idea what to do. The Hapan fleet was breaking formation to let the Alliance ships proceed toward Orelon VI, which would have been the ideal setup for a trap if the Alliance hadn't had twice as many ships as Vahl did. He couldn't believe the admiral would simply let the Alliance evacuate the loyalists; Darth Saydel would kill her for it. There had to be a plan but Terrid had no idea what it was, and for the first time this situation was entirely out of his control.

He reached out with the Force, tracing Maleth's battle meditation to its locus to contact the other Sith one-on-one. He knew from experience that Maleth was capable of a mental bond as

expressive as any dialogue but he seemed Terrid's touch. It felt like Maleth didn't want to be distracted from something else, which only made Terrid feel more in the dark.

He watched with mounting frustration as the first Alliance ships slipped past Vahl's fleet and descended toward Orelon VI. He counted two heavy cruisers, a few small support ships, and a pair of wide-hulled troop carriers that might carry twenty or thirty thousand people each. The Alliance was going to need a few more of those to carry off all the loyalists.

And then his sensor board lit up yet again, declaring another wave of new arrivals. Instead of dropping out of hyperspace behind the Alliance ships these ones started to emerge from the surroundings Mists, just like the loyalists had. Terrid's first thought was that these were more of that bunch, but his computer quickly marked all the new ships as Hapan: Battle Dragons, Nova cruisers, wings of Miy'til fighters already pouring out of their hangars. These ships must have been waiting in the Mists for hours, even days, waiting to spring this trap.

Terrid was astonished. He'd had no idea the Alliance was planning to come to Orelon. Darth Saydel hadn't either, or at least she'd given no indication. It might have been a reserve force in case the loyalists mustered a better defense than expected.

Then he looked at his sensors again and his whole body clenched with dread. He read the names marking each of the new ships and recognized them all as belonging to the queen's elite task force. These were the ships that should have been laying waste to Shedu Maad right now.

The Alliance had stumbled into a trap, but it wasn't a trap meant for them or even for the loyalists.

It was a trap made for Darth Terrid, and he'd walked proudly into it.

He fired his engines and broke formation, spinning his Fury away from the other Sith just seconds before he felt a new command pass through Darth Maleth's battle-meld. Behind him space lit up with laser-blasts and exploding shadow-bombs as the betrayal he'd planned happened in horrible reverse. The Sith he'd

sought out and chosen, the Sith as eager as he to shed the weight of Darth Krayt's dreams and take the fight to the Jedi, died one after one under the guns of those loyal to their dreaming Lord.

Even as they killed the last of his allies, the remaining Furies dove after Terrid's craft. With no place else to run, he pointed his nose toward Orelon and fired engines to full. Behind him space lit up with battle joined anew: Hapans versus loyalists, Alliance versus Hapans. It would be a massive, messy brawl and Terrid no longer cared who won. The battle that really mattered, Sith versus Sith, had ended in a flash.

It was all he could do now to and survive.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Marin was warned and ready when Vitor triggered the alarm, but she didn't know what the reaction would be here in the main palace chamber, where the long feast and entertainment had wound down and the two Hutts looked like they were finally ready to start negotiating.

Marin had already taken stock and knew what she planned to do. Up on the dais right now were the Hutts; herself, Nat, and Leegish hidden inside their bulky Nikto armor; Vedo's two Zeltron dancers and the Rodian-faced droid they'd come all this way for. It was, she thought, as ideal a set-up as she'd get, but when she saw a male Twi'lek in black robes and two Weequay guards hurrying along the chamber's edge toward the dais, she knew things were going to get tricky. As they approached she spotted some of Soergg's other guards quietly filing toward the nearest exit. The alarm had gone off alright, and the palace was about to go on lockdown.

It was now or never. Marin judged Nat in the Force and whispered to the Squib strapped on her back, "Get ready."

"I've *been* ready, Jedi."

Soergg spotted the activity and eyed the Twi'lek's approach. Marin had the trigger for the smoke bombs the Zeltron dancers had

planted, and while that would give them some cover for their action the three newcomers could mess everything up.

There was another option. She'd been eyeing those chandeliers dangling on long chords from the high ceiling. As the performance had drawn on she'd experimented a little, reaching out with the Force to touch them, to judge their weight and how easily it would take to rip one free. There were six of them in all and she'd touched one after another until she found one that felt more loosely bolted to its chord than the others.

It would have been much easier to throw her lightsaber and cut those things down, but that would show her hand a second too early. Instead she grabbed that loose chandelier with the full strength of her mind and pulled.

It broke free just as the Twi'lek got within five meters of the dais. As it jerked from the chord its light flickered out, drawing attention, stopping the Twi'lek in his tracks. She then hurled it through the air and smashed it into the wall ahead of him. The Twi'lek's guards pulled him back, shielding him with their armored bodies against the spray of shattered glass.

At the exact same moment, Marin triggered the smoke bombs. Lights flashed and back clouds swelled out to fill the entire lowest layer of the chamber. People in the upper levels started to scream. Soergg bellowed orders. Marin barely noticed.

"Do it now!" she told Leegish, and the Squib acted immediately.

The Krish'nor armored suit they'd been sharing had been modified so the entire back plate could swing open like a door. Leegish kicked it clear, unbuckled himself from Marin's harness, and jumped out into the smoke. It was harder for her to disentangle herself but it could be done. The joints of the suit locked and she drew her arms and legs to her torso. Its spacious abdomen left her with enough room to pull them tight; then she ducked her head low, leaned back, and let herself spill onto the dais.

She landed on her side and immediately sprung to her feet. Smoke swelled on all sides, obscuring her vision, and the next thing she saw was one of Vedo's pink Zelton dancers darting past her and climbing into the suit, just as planned. When the smoke cleared the

Zeltrons would be more easily missed than a pair of Krish'nor in towering armor. Then she spotted a blur of Leegish's white fur and chased it, though the smoke, to the other armorer suit. Nat was already out, the other dancer was getting in. Still according to plan.

Soergg was loudly bellowing for help from that Twi'lek majordomo. His protocol droid, stuck against the back wall for the long performance, was shuffling up to its master. Marin didn't let it get there; she threw herself at the machine, landed hard against it, and used the Force to carry them both off the dais and onto the main floor.

They landed with a clatter that was sure to draw attention, even with the smoke. She heard Nat and Leegish drop down behind her but all she cared about was finding the right grate. The smoke was starting lift and she found it with her eyes. As the protocol droid lay sprawled on its back, stiff limbs flailing, she ignited her lightsaber and cut through the sides of the grate with four gold flashes. By then Leegish was beside her and Nat was straddling the droid with arms locked around its waist.

Marin shut off her lightsaber and waved them forward. The Squid was the first through; then Nat half-carried and half-pushed the still-struggling droid through the hole. The apprentice followed and Marin went through last, sparing a moment to grab the cut-free grate in the Force and pull it back down over the drain, camouflaging their escape for a few crucial moments more.

Because he was no fan of mud baths and it was too early for alien slave girls, Korosh Vull had decided he'd might as well attend this grand ceremony Soergg was hosting. It was, unsurprisingly, to celebrate the arrival of another Hutt, probably a kajidic from a different clan. Despite the food, drink, and drawn-out musical numbers, Vull had a sneaking suspicion these two Hutts were not, in fact, close friends and that once the show was over they'd get down the real business of Soergg's stolen merchandise.

From her perch on the balcony two tiers above the man floor, Vull had spotted that Twi'lek and his guards hurrying toward Soergg's dais and figured something unscheduled was happening.

Then the chandelier had not just fallen but been wrenched free by an invisible hand, and then the entire lower section of the hall filled with smoke.

A lot of the motley aliens who'd been watching the scene with Vull panicked and darted away from the guardrail but the Imperial stayed where he was. He peered down at the swirling smoke, listened to Soergg's rumbling shouts, and tried to make sense of the forms he saw shifting beneath the haze.

The first thing he clearly spotted was the glint of something metal falling from the dais. Then he saw a few more bodies, two or three, tumble after it. He leaned forward, stomach pressed against the guardrail, and watched as a gold light flashed, four times. Motion cleared some of the smoke away. He watched as something small and white fell through a hole in the floor. Then he saw a human with long blond hair throw the body of Soergg's protocol droid down the hole, followed by himself. Smoke swelled again to obscure the last of it, but he saw one last figure, probably a woman, drop through the hole too.

Vull looked back at the dais, where the smoke was a bit thinner. That Twi'lek had made his way up to Soergg and was explaining something to the irate Hutt. Soergg was bellowing orders and didn't seem to notice his droid was gone.

The whole situation was astonishing and confounding; the only thing Vull knew for sure was that if that Rodian-faced droid was worth stealing, Soergg would be grateful to anyone who helped get it back.

The audience on the balcony was churning around frantically. Aliens were shouting on all sides and most of them seemed to be trying to get to the exits. Vull wasn't going to attempt to shoulder past them; instead he looked over their heads and saw the high ceremonial pike carried by Soergg's palace guards. He pushed his way past two shrieking Nimbanese, skirted around a lumbering Vippit, and finally grabbed the guard by the shoulder.

The Weequay was spun off-balance but it quickly knocked Vull back with an elbow and swung its pike toward him.



"Wait!" Vull shouting, holding his hands palm-out. "I'm trying to help! I saw two people escape down there!"

He stabbed one hand at the balcony rail and the smoke-filled chamber beyond, but the Nikto just jabbered something in Huttese and waved the pike threateningly.

"Do you *want* to lose your job, you idiot?" Vull snarled. "They're stealing your master's droid!"

The roof of Soergg's palace was, in theory, a good place to hide from all the guards scrambling inside it. Once the guards examined the broken window and the hole cut through the armor plate, however, they'd invariably realize that the art thieves had come from outside. That determined, they didn't have to do much looking to find the two Imperial Knights, one of whom cradled the precious Alderaan-glass vase to his chest even as he hefted his unlit lightsaber with his free hand.

"They won't just shoot us down," Vitor told his cousin. "They won't risk breaking the vase."

"Are you sure?" Mohrgan breathed. Nobody had clambered onto the roof with them yet, but it was only a matter of time.

"Pretty sure," said Vitor, and turned his eyes up. His brother was up there, he could feel Roan reaching for him in the Force, telling him he was on the way. The palace guard hadn't launched any airspeeders yet, but if they did it would be impossible to either run or hide.

The real attack took them both by surprise. Vitor was spinning himself in constantly stead circles, watching every edge of the roof, and he still almost missed the single Toydarian as its fast-flapping wings lifted its gourd-shaped body up over the edge. Its dark shape was nearly occluded by the silhouette of a smaller tower rising behind it, but motion snagged in the corner of Vitor's eye and spun him into action. He ignited his white-bladed lightsaber and instinctively caught the first shot, even though he had to reach high to do it. The Toydarian wasn't shooting to kill; it wanted to keep the thieves pinned in place until backup arrived.

That didn't mean it wasn't a threat. The Toydarian lifted higher above the rooftop and fired two more shots, both of which Vitor deflected. At the same time Mohrgan had swapped out his saber for a hold-out blaster. Vase still pressed against his chest he lifted the gun and fired at the flying alien. Even from this range Mohrgan managed a deliberate glancing shot that caused the Toydarian to drop his blaster. With a burst from its wings it dove down, out of sight.

Vitor pivoted and gave his cousin a slap on the shoulder. "That was good shooting."

Moonlight showed the satisfaction in Mohrgan's face, and then the panic. Vitor turned. He saw three silhouetted bodies finish hauling themselves over the edge of the roof. Two were already on their knees and one had his blaster raised to fire.

Red light flashed toward them like a thrusting blade. Instinct moved Vitor's body. He didn't even try to deflect it; he jumped sideways, out of its path.

Vitor's sudden movement caught Mohrgan off-guard and robbed him of a crucial split-second's reaction. With blaster in hand he had nothing to deflect the shot and instead tried to back away as his cousin had, but all he managed to do was pivot. The red plasma-bolt skimmed across his left side and scorched his upper-arm. The young man let out of a cry of pain, dropped his gun, but somehow kept grasping the vase even as he pitched down to his knees.

The hit, the cry, and the fall all seemed to play out to Vitor in slow-motion. As he watched his cousin, shocked and wounded but still resolute, he felt a wave of shame wash over him like he'd never felt before.

The flash of red light had triggered all the edgy paranoid he'd been keeping at bay. There was no Sith Lord here, no Marin. He wasn't supposed to die here but the fear that rattled his nerves made him forget that for once crucial second, and it had nearly gotten Mohrgan killed.

As Vitor froze in place the three gunmen were racing across the rooftop toward them, rifles raised but not yet firing. One of them shouted, "Put it down, Jedi scum! Put it *down*!"

It wasn't supposed to end like this. It *couldn't* end like this. His dreams always showed him true. Even when he'd given anything if they didn't.

"Mohrgan, stay down," Vitor told the teenager on his knees.

"Vitor," he called, and his cousin look down to see Mohrgan with the vase stuck between his thighs, right hand raised, lightsaber leaping from his fingertips.

Vitor caught it. He'd not trained much in two-handed fighting but Mohrgan's confidence- his automatic assumption that his cousin would charge bravely into the fight- almost washed clear the shame of his previous cowardice.

When he ignited the second blade the charging enemies automatically started to fire. More red blasts shot his way and Vitor raced to meet them.

The drainage system that ran beneath the main chamber of Soergg's palace was filthy, smelly, and had barely enough room for Marin and Nat to crawl on their hands and knees. Despite the green-brown muck catching on his white fur, Leegish the Squib seemed perfectly happy working in those conditions.

The galaxy's self-proclaimed best droid slicer under one meter tall was currently squatting on top of Soergg's protocol droid. The deactivated machine lay face-down in the muck and Leegish had pried apart the silver plate covering the back of its torso to fish around in the its metal entrails. From her spot behind Leegish, Marin couldn't see what he was doing and probably wouldn't understand if she could.

"How's it coming?" asked Nat, who was stuck looking on from the other side. "Did you disable the self-destruct yet?"

"Almost. Took a while to find the charge. I'm disabling it now."

"How big is this charge?" asked Nat. "If it goes off-"

"Don't you dare make me think about that," said the Squib.

Nat shut up. Leegish worked. Marin reached out with the Force and tried to get a sense of what was happening elsewhere. Vitor was still up there, and Mohrgan. They felt like they were fighting for their lives. That meant father wasn't here yet. The panic in the upper chambers seemed to have subsided, which meant the Soergg had probably realized his droid was missing by now. A good chunk of his security force would be scattered around the palace trying to find the art thieves, which would hopefully provide Marin with the opening to slip back to her X-wing.

If not, then this would be a very stupid way for two Jedi to get themselves killed.

"Got it!" Leegish announced.

"Self-destruct's gone? You sure?"

"Positive." The Squib hopped off the droid's body. "Now let's get it out of here."

"This is going to be awkward," muttered Nat.

"Not so bad," Leegish waved a paw. "Use that lightsaber. Cut off everything from the waist down."

"We wanted this thing intact," Marin said.

"You want all the neat info in its memory banks. Those are all in the head and upper body. Lower body's just for motion. Trust me, I'm the-"

"I know what you are. Get clear."

Marin shuffled on her knees until she was on top of the droid, ignited her lightsaber, and slashed it through the waist. A few sparks flashed beneath her but that was all.

"Can you get it on your back?" asked Leegish.

Marin's head and shoulders were currently scraping the top of the drainage chute. "Not likely. Let's get out of here first. Where's the exit?"

The Squib blinked at her. She sighed. "You don't know where the exit is?"

"I know *droids*. How am I supposed to know Soergg's sewer system? You've got your lightsaber, just cut a hole."

She tried to guess how far she'd fallen when she dove into this muck, how deep beneath the ground-level floor this sewage system

ran. Nat didn't hesitate to turn on his lightsaber and stab it upward. His lightsaber burned through the metal walls. He scooted back before completing the circle, then let a chunk of everything above them drop into the sewer with them.

Metal and stone crashed down. They choked on a cloud of dust grinded from substances Marin didn't even want to think about and she called on the Force for a gust of air that pushed the disgusting haze down the tunnel.

"Okay," Nat coughed, "Bad idea."

"Maybe not so bad." Leegish hopped onto the pile of rubble beneath the whole and stuck his white head through it. His whole body stretched up, and then all of him went through.

When his dangling legs and furry tail disappeared Marin crawled over the droid's dust-coated body and looked up through the gap. "What do you see?"

"It's a hallway," the Squid called back. "Looks clear."

Marin tried to sense the area above with the Force. She found Leegish there but nobody else, so she backed away and told Nat, "Go on up. Keep an eye on him I'll be there in a second."

As the apprentice awkwardly crawled through the hole he'd cut, Marin wrapped her arms around the droid's torso and lifted it up as best she could in the confined space. When Nat was through the hole, she crawled beneath it and pushed the droid up. Finally she snaked herself through and pushed her filth-encrusted body onto the cold clean flagstones of the chamber above.

As she lay there, Leegish stepped beside her and looked down with unreadable black eyes. "Don't trust me, do you?"

"I trust you just fine," she lied. "Nat?"

"Right here," he said from her other side.

Marin rolled onto her stomach, then pushed herself up. Nat was on his feet and looking around the long, dark hallway they'd emerged from.

"Any idea where to go next?" he asked.

"If we run into a bunch of guys with guns, go the other way," Marin said, then knelt beside the deactivated droid. With

everything beneath the hips cut off it was still heavy, but she could deal with it if she didn't have far to go.

She called that over and the apprentice helped her strap the droid onto her back using the same harness she'd carried Leegish with. The Squib kept looking left and right and when one long ear perked up she asked, "Hear something?"

He stabbed a paw in one direction. "We need to go that way."

"Why?" asked Nat.

"Because guys with guns are going to come from the other side in less than a minute.

"Great." Marin breathed hard and pushed herself to standing. She staggered under the fresh weight but could bear it, for now. At least she wasn't clanking around in a set of oversized armor anymore.

"Are you okay?" asked Leegish. He was already bounding for the exit.

"I'll manage," Marin grunted, and hurried after him.

Nat hung beside her, one hand on his shut-off lightsaber, just waiting for their pursuers to come bursting in. When they reached the door, the Squib looked up at them imploringly.

"It's locked," he said simply.

"I'll handle it," said Nat. He turned on his lightsaber and gave the door a quick look-over. Its frame was too narrow for a Hutt, which meant they were in corridors only servants and guards went through.

There was no graceful way to do it, so Nat made three diagonal strikes to carve a hole. Leegish hopped through first but Nat held back so Marin could stagger through.

That was when the portal at the far end of the corridor opened and the infantry finally arrived. A cut-open door wouldn't hold them for long but Marin hurried ahead and Nat stayed right behind her, deflecting shots with his saber. Leegish hurried to the end of point there this corridor hit a wall but branched off in two perpendicular directions. The Squib ducked to the right but immediately peeked around the corner's edge and began shooting back with the small hold-out blaster he'd kept tucked in his belt.

As soon as Marin joined him Leegish said, "You Jedi'd be a lot more helpful if you carried ranged weapons."

"We're plenty helpful," she muttered.

Nat swung around the left side and continued to flash his lightsaber out, deflecting shots. They'd slowed the enemies advance but Marin looked down the branches in the hallway and saw locked doors on either end.

"Are we trapped?" breathed Nat. After putting up a valiant show all this time he was finally starting to panic.

"Not exactly." In between shots Leegish tilted his snout toward the long wall that spanned both branches. "See how it's curved? See those *windows*? We're on the outer edge."

As Nat and Leegish stayed to hold off the attackers Marin slipping out of firing range, down the rightward branch, and went over to the wall. Sure enough, there was a subtle curvature to it, and when she got close she spotted manual latches beneath what she'd taken as long rectangular wall-panels. She tugged the latch down and pushed the panel outward, swinging the bottom side out on top-side hinges. Damp air slipped through the gap and she peeked through just long enough to see swampland spreading out fifteen meters beneath them.

Before she could open her mouth to tell the others, the locked door ahead of her slid open. Three more guards rushed through, rifles ready, but the sight of a woman just a meter ahead took them by surprise. Marin was surprised too but she recovered faster; her lightsaber came to life in her hand and immediately cut through one guard's weapon. The second one got off a shot but she deflected it back at him, catching his chest beneath his armor. The third one tried to take her flank but Marin pivoted so he could see the captive droid strapped on her back. That gave him just enough pause for Marin to jab her lightsaber into his thigh, then pull it back and cut through his blaster.

Two down. She knew the first guard was still behind her and she did the first thing she could think of: fall right back, smacking the droid's metal Rodian-shaped face into the man's forehead.

As soon as he fell, Marin heard the hiss of a moving door and looked at the portal through which they'd come. The one who'd taken the chest-shot had sprawled back, rifle lying dropped his feet and one arm flailed over his head and into the doorway's threshold. The metal portal tried to slide shut, hit the outstretched arm, retracted, tried again, and retreated, over and over.

Marin had an idea. She scooped up the blaster, called Nat's name, and tossed it at him. The apprentice had good reflexes; he caught it with his free hand, shifted to get a shooting grip, then joined Leegish in pumping blasts at their attackers.

Marin went back to the window closest to the stuck door and pushed it open from the bottom. It didn't go wide but it went wide enough.

She called Nat's name again and asked, "You got your grappler?"

The young man nodded and, understanding, ducked across the hallway, deflecting another hail of laserfire as he did. Once he was clear he handed Marin back the rifle, hooked his lightsaber to his belt, and drew out the grappling gun Vitor had provided them.

"You guys better not run without me!" Leegish shouted as he kept firing.

"Don't worry, just hold on," Marin told him.

As Nat hooked the grappler's claw to the window base and prepared to lower himself down, he told Marin, "Send the droid next. I'll use the Force so he lands soft."

Right now she'd do anything to get this heavy thing off. After Nat crawled through the gap and lowered down, she unstrapped the harness on her back.

Leegish cried, "They just got reinforcements! I can't hold any more!"

"Just a few seconds!" Marin called over the increasing volume of the blasterfire. She picked the droid torso up with both arms, shoved it through the window, and trusted Nat to take care of the rest. Mercifully free of their weight, she dashed over to Leegish and, standing right above him, peeked over the corner's edge to pop her own shots back at their attackers.

"You're right," she said, "There *are* more of 'em."



"Do I look like a liar?" his white fur bristled. "Tell me I can go."

"Get outta here. I'll be right behind you."

"About time." Leegish pocketed his hold-out and darted for the window. The moment he got there he looked back and shouted, "That's a hell of a drop!"

"Trust Nat! He'll catch you?"

She was pretty sure the Squib grumbled short protest before he jumped. The laserfire was coming fiercer than ever and by now had turned the wall behind her into a scorched mess. It was time to run. Marin popped off one last rain of shots, enough to give them a second's hesitation, then ran for the window. She already had her grappler in hand and she affixed it to the outside base of the windowframe, then slid her whole body through. With both hands on the grappling gun she let herself drop and dangle and didn't dare look down.

Instead she called on the Force once more. She tugged the window shut. She made the door that couldn't close as wide-open as her invisible push could hold it; enough to convince the guards that they'd gone down that rightward corridor. She heard the clatter of them turning the corner, felt bodies passing right by the shut window, and released her Force-grip on the door.

Then, finally, she released the grappling chord's lock and let herself fall, a controlled steady descent, down into the muck that surrounded Soergg's palace.

It wasn't as bad as she'd feared. Instead of landing up to her armpits in mud-water she crashed through a patch of spindly tree-branches and landed on her butt on a patch of moss-covered, mildly soft earth. Nat, Leegish, and half a droid were already there, hiding in the shadow against the tree's gnarled trunk. After Marin called the grappler's chord back to her gun she crawled over and joined them.

"Are we okay?" she asked. "We look okay."

"I've looked worse," said Leegish. "Now let's get out of here."

They'd come very far, but now they'd reached the part Marin really hadn't looked forward to. She looked at Nat and said, "I'm

taking the droid from here. You need to hold out in the swamp, lay low, and when Arlen comes, he'll pick you up."

"I can handle it," he said firmly. Shadows hid his face but he made himself clear in the Force. He was proud of what they'd done, and proud he'd done it with her. She wasn't used to that kind of admiration and devotion but, almost against herself, some of his optimism bled into her.

"Thank you, Nat," Marin breathed. "And keep an eye on Leegish too."

"Not so fast, Jedi," the Squib shook his head. "I'm coming with you."

"You can't be—"

"Your ride's got room for me too," he said, and Marin realized he had that hold-out blaster pointed right at her.

Nat tensed and reached for his saber but Marin held up a hand. "You really want to press this, Leegish?"

"My orders from direct from Vedo. That droid doesn't leave my sight until I get it back to Napdu."

Nat said, "If you don't trust us why should we—"

"That's okay," Marin told the boy. "I can handle one little Squib. It'll just be a tight fit."

"Yeah, well, we're used to that." Leegish lowered the pistol but didn't holster it. "Come on, Jedi. Strap the droid back on. We're close to the end but we're not there yet."

A white blur flashed through the barrel of the last guard's rifle. Sparks flew back in his face, stunning him for a moment and giving Vitor a chance to lunge close and snap an elbow in the Weequay's face. The alien's thick skull dampened the blow but Vitor struck again, hard against the right temple, and finally succeeded in dropping him.

He stood panting in the moonlight and looked around the rooftop. All three attackers were unconscious, their weapons destroyed. Mohrgan was on his knees but still alert and still clutching that damned Alderaanian vase with his good hand. Vitor felt a thrill of victory with his adrenaline-surge, and with them both

an unfamiliar marvel. A second before this fight he's shrunk back on instinctive fear of death, even though he knew he'd never die this way. The Force had promised him otherwise. Once he'd charged the attackers he'd given himself over to instinct and training, to every reflexive skill he'd honed as a trained Imperial knight. And he'd won, effortlessly.

That meant there was no need to fear death, not until Marin was with him, not until he saw looked that beautiful sneering Sith woman in the eye.

He felt the weight that had been on him since the dream lifting. It was simple, and he should have realized before. The Force's message was a curse and a burden, but it was also a gift if he knew what to do with it.

So he didn't feel fear when he heard the sound he'd been waiting for, the soft roar of an airspeeder's engines whirring to life. He stalked over to Mohrgan and stood over his cousin with a blazing white sword in either hand, and together they watched as the speeder burst into the sky, dropped itself directly above the rooftop, and shone its blazing spotlight in their faces.

As a half-dozen more armed guards dropped on fiberchords from the speeder's hold, Vitor reached out with the Force for his brother. Roan was coming. Roan was close, very close. The guards starting shouting for him to put down his sabers and the airspeeders engine whined loud overhead but, beneath it all, he could already hear the low roar of rent air.

As the guards formed a firing circle around the two Knights, Mohrgan rose on trembling feet. His damaged arm hung limp at his side but he still clasped the vase. "Do you feel that?" he panted.

"I feel it," Vitor said.

Then they heard the sound of laserfire, not from the rooftop but distant and approaching. The guards heard it too and several looked around even as they kept their guns pointed at Vitor and Mohrgan. Red and green lights, an exchange of laserfire, flashed against the stars. Vitor tried to make sense of the light-show, saw far more red shots than green ones, and took a good guess at what had delayed their pickup ride.

But then, drawing Soergg's air defense forces had been half the point of their crazy endeavor.

*Starlight Champion* streaked across the night sky. The big, clunky-looking slant-winged scout craft moved with impressive agility as four of the Hutt's starfighters buzzed around it. As Vitor watched a chain of laserblasts shot out from the gun turret beneath the cockpit and speared through the nearest fighter. The craft became a fireball that plunged down into the swamp and exploded, sending tremors that carried all the way to the rooftop.

As *Starlight Champion* banked toward the palace it unleashed another set of blasts from its forward guns. The airspeeder hovering above them veered away to avoid the fire, leaving the guards it had dropped stunned and confused.

Vitor saw an opening but held, held, until *Champion* dropped low over the rooftop and his brother Roan leaped down from the already-extended landing ramp. Half the guards turned to start shooting at Roan's bobbing white lightsaber but Vitor and Mohrgan were already in motion. Vitor gave Mohrgan a shove in the Force, pushing him ahead as he scampered head-down for the lowered ramp. It would still take a Force-assisted leap to get him up there but even in his damaged state the young Knight could do it.

There were still six guards and they did their best to shoot Mohrgan down as he escaped. Roan fell on the ones closest to him, cutting through one rifle-barrel, kicking another guard down, and slicing the arm off a third. Vitor charged the rest, but even as he started deflecting their laser-blasts and bounding closer he saw another group, at least a half-dozen more, pull themselves over the edge of the rooftop and come toward him.

He got close enough to one guard to cut off both wrists with a snip of two lightsabers, then looked back at *Champion*. More starfighters were swarming over his uncle's ship, peppering its faltering shields with red laserblasts. Mohrgan was nowhere to be seen, escaped. Roan was halfway between him and the ramp; between them were three standing guards and many more were coming on him fast from behind.

In the distance, in the darkness, he couldn't see his brother's face. He didn't have to. Roan was screaming at him in the Force, telling him to make a break for it right now.

It would take crucial seconds, time *Champion* might not have. Yet Vitor wasn't worried. He wasn't panicked, wasn't scared. He felt more at peace than he had in days because he knew he couldn't die here, and he knew he'd see his family again. He wished he could all explain that to his brother, but there was simply no time.

Instead he shouted "Go now!" as loud as he could, and screamed the message just as clearly in the Force.

Then one of the guards off his left flank raised his rifle and fired a shot. The moment it left the muzzle the blast looked bright red like a kill shot, but when it slammed into Vitor's chest he knew it was merely a stun blast. A wave of tingling overtook his body, and then a wave of numbness, and before he passed out he nothing but satisfaction.

The moment his brother's body pitched forward and hit the rooftop, Roan wanted to race forward, hack down a dozen guards, grab his body, and haul him back to *Champion*. He wanted to do it even though Vitor's final words and final thought had urged him to escape.

But the brother's instinct passed in a second and he remembered what else he was: an Imperial Prince, an Imperial Knight, a servant of his father. All of those parts of him knew there was nothing he could do for Vitor now, and that a few more second's delay might destroy *Starlight Champion* and everyone aboard.

So he turned away from his brother, bounded across the rooftop, and threw himself up onto *Champion's* waiting ramp. As soon as his boots and palms hit metal he shouted that he was aboard and scrambled up. By the time he got into the hold the ship was lurching skyward.

He struggled to get up to the cockpit. His uncle Arlen was at the controls, wrestling a performance out of his ship that Roan had forgotten it was capable of. Mohrgan had made it to the seat behind

his and Treis was strapped into the co-pilot's spot. He didn't even look back at Roan when he came in; the other Knight's attention was focused entirely on controlling *Champion's* ventral gun turret.

"Can we get out of here?" Roan grabbed the back of Mohrgan's chair.

"Get back to the ramp!" Arlen barked. "We've got one more pickup!"

Roan was in no position to argue. The ship kept trying to smash him into a bulkhead but he made it back to the hold and crawled out onto the ramp in time to get a faceful of hot wind and see the gnarled trees of the swamp jump to meet them. Then he spotted the blaze of one blue lightsaber against the tangled brush. The lightsaber bounced rapidly through the dark and then it was upon them. Roan used the Force to help steady Nat Skywalker as the young Jedi leaped up for the ramp. Just as his boots hit metal an outside blast rocked *Champion*. Nat spilled into Roan and both went tumbling up the ramp, into the hold.

The ship jumped upward, they disentangled from each other. As Roan rolled away from the Jedi he wiped away the faceful of awful-smelling muck he'd just received and said, "How did you get so *filthy*?"

"You try crawling through a Hutt sewer," Nat spat and hurried for the cockpit.

Roan was right behind him and when they got there Arlen had pointed them straight at the stars. Relief lasted long as one breath; then red lasers flashed past them, their shields shuddered, and a Hutt starfighter swung past them and wheeled around for another pass.

"How many left?" asked Nat.

"Three," Arlen grunted. "I'm making a run for it."

"Can our shields last us 'til we get to hyperspace?" Roan asked.

"Nope."

"Then why-"

"Here she comes," called Treis.

The ship ahead burst into flame and a new fighter darted into vision: an antique, quad-engine X-wing with a chipped red

checkerboard paint job. The old rebel fighter wheeled out of view but its lasers were already flashing. Roan braced for a few parting shots from the pursuing ships but they never came.

Finally, Treis announced a hail and turned on the comm system. Marin Fel's voice crackled over the speaker, saying, "You're all clear, Dad!"

"Great job. Thanks for the save."

"Thanks for drawing them off so I could launch."

"You got what we came for?"

"Indeed she does," squeaked a higher-pitched, surly voice.

"That's my, uh, partner," Marin explained.

"I'm ensuring Lord Vedo gets his property."

"His *stolen* property," Arlen rolled his eyes. "Marin, set your course for Napdu."

"No problem. You got everyone, right?"

Grim silence froze the conversation. It was Roan who said, "We left Vitor behind."

"*What?*"

"Marin, it's okay," said Arlen.

"He's an Imperial prince and he just got captured by a *shabla* Hutt!"

"It's not just Soergg down there, it's *Vedo*, and Vedo's got all the leverage he could want over Soergg. Vitor wanted a way to track the shipments to the Restorationists. He can get that personally now. He's right where he needs to be."

In his panic, none of that had ever occurred to Roan and he prayed to the Force that it was true.

Marin sounded similarly skeptical. "Dad, how do we know we can trust Vedo?"

"You've got *Vedo's* leverage, remember? Call ahead to Napdu and make sure they know if Vitor doesn't go free, Anjiliac doesn't get the droid we went through all the hassle of stealing."

"Not sure if my passenger would agree to that," she grunted, "But I can try."

"Good. Just remember, you're in control, not them."

Her voice went suspicious. "Dad, what's up? Aren't you coming to Napdu too?"

Arlen took a breath. "No. We're not."

"We're *not*?" Roan and Treis bleated as one.

"Where *are* we going?" asked Nat.

Arlen shifted to look back at his apprentice. "Nat, we just got a distress call from your mother. She's in the Hapes Cluster and she needs help."

"Wait," Roan snapped, "We left our *ship* on Napdu. We have to take it back to Bastion and explain to my father what-"

"You can tell my brother all he needs to know from this ship," Arlen said. "Jade's out there with a bunch of other Jedi and thousands of innocent people all they're about to get mauled to pieces by some *Sith*. If that's more important than your damned freighter than you'll have to take my ship from me."

All the royal fury he'd roused a second ago dissolved to nothing. Roan stared at his uncle's eyes, more commanding and intimidating than he'd remembered, and asked, "The Sith? Really?"

"That's right." Arlen turned forward. "You hear that, Marin?"

"I got it dad," she said grimly. "Listen, I can drop off the droid, then-"

"No. Stay on Napdu, make sure Vitor gets released. Take care of him. He's your responsibility. We'll handle Hapes. Understand?"

"What about the Alderaanian vase?" squeaked Marin's passenger.

"The vase is for Chance, remember? I'll make sure he gets it." Arlen said. "Marin, do you copy? Will you do it like I asked?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay, Dad. Roan, you still there?"

"Yes," he croaked, not imposing at all now.

"I'll take care of your brother. Don't worry. You help your uncle."

He nodded, then remembered words. "I understand. And... thank you."

He watched from the back of the cockpit as Marin's X-wing veered ahead. It folded its S-foils together and winked off into



hyperspace. A few seconds later *Starlight Champion* tilted toward a different heading and then it, too, was gone.

When they took Vitor in to see Soergg his limbs were still tingling from the residue of the stun blast and he could only move in awkward shuffles for the cuffs binding his ankles. Despite this he felt confident as he stepped into the chamber and saw Vedo along with Soergg.

Standing between the two Hutts was a pale-skinned Twi'lek who sounded rather harried as he translated Soergg's opening words. "His Lordship wishes the begin by expressing how disappointed he is that an Imperial Prince, the son of the esteemed Emperor Fel, would stoop to making himself a pawn in Vedo Anjiliac's criminal schemes."

Vedo made some chuckling remark. Soergg's unspoken response, best Vitor could tell, was an absolutely spiteful glare.

"I take it the job was a success," Vitor said, looking at Vedo.

The Twi'lek didn't bother to translate Vedo's response but from the bobbing of the Hutt's broad head Vitor guessed it was an affirmative. He turned back to Soergg and said, "If you want that droid back, you'll have to deal with me first. Vedo explained that, didn't he?"

Soergg sounded a grudging affirmative and the Twi'lek said, "His Lordship understands you are here about his purported connections with the Restorationist movement."

"That's right. We know you supplied them with the ship used to destroy the skyhook over Bastion. They killed thousands of Imperial civilians and my father won't rest until the beings responsible are punished."

The Twi'lek surprised Vitor by saying, "His Lordship was totally unaware how his freighter was to be used. He is not responsible."

"I didn't expect you to admit it that fast."

Soergg spoke again. A small hand flapped dismissively. The Twi'lek translated, "The Restorationists have been troublesome clients. It would be a relief if you took them off his hands."

"Really? And he'll agree to stop shipping weapons to Arquilla too? Did he get that part of the deal?"

Soergg glared at Vedo again and said something to him. Vedo said something back, then his whole bloated body trembled with laughter. Soergg looked away and seemed to simmer in his own anger. For once, Vitor felt a compelling desire to learn Huttese.

When Soergg spoke next, though, it was to Vitor, and the Twi'lek said, "His Lordship agrees to cease operations on Arquilla. He also offers you a method to infiltrate the Restorationists."

"Let's hear it."

"He requests your word, as Prince of the Empire, that once he complies neither you nor any other Imperial will harass him again."

Vitor smothered laughter into a smile. "Okay, fine. You have my word. What's the offer?"

Soergg spoke again, for longer than before, and when he was done the Twi'lek said, "An emissary from the Restorationists is currently inside this palace. His Lordship will not permit any violent confrontation inside his domain, but he does offer to place you hidden aboard the man's ship. Once the two of you are clear of Kor Vosadii, you may do whatever you want with him."

Vitor had felt fortunate coming in but this was unbelievable. "A Restorationist? Here? Can I ask why?"

Soergg's response was curt. The Twi'lek said, "The Restorationist came to apologize in person for misusing His Lordship's merchandise. Again, no harm against your people was ever intended."

Funny words from a weapons merchant, but Vitor was all out of humor. The full reality was settling over him now. He'd gotten even more than what he'd wanted and now he had to take things to completion. He could board that Restorationist shuttle, stow away, and ride it all the way back to whatever rat's nest it had come from, maybe even the big nest where Veers and Grave and *Nemesis* were hiding. And then this conflict, the war for the Empire's heart that had defined the lives of everyone in his family for the past eight years, would finally be over.

He wasn't drunk with victory. He could see the risks of trying to infiltrate an enemy base on his own, yet those risks looked smaller than ever before. He knew how he would die and it was not to the gun of some cortosis-armored stormtrooper. He wasn't invincible; they could still hurt him, but he stood capable of annihilating the Restorationist movement, once and for all.

There was simply no way he could back down.

"You have yourself a deal," he told Soergg, then raised his shackled wrists high. "Now please, I'd like to get out of these. And if you don't mind, I'd like both of those lightsabers back."

Kaynar Auchs might not have been the most bold or ambitious warrior on Mandalore, but he knew how to track bounties. He knew how to capture people and he knew how to lay traps.

Once he was shown the recording from Chorax, Shalk Jeban was eager to help. Almost too eager; the old fighter offered to do more but Kaynar insisted he merely arrange a meeting between one of his proxies and the targets to discuss the merchandise the Skiratas were shopping around. The proxy was a Mando named Oran Vasur, distant relative of Jeban who'd been on good terms with Dorn Skirata when they were younger. Vasur extended an invitation to meet Dorn at one of Keldabe's smaller tapcafes, with an added request to see what had become of the little girl he'd last met a decade back.

The beauty was that Vasur knew nothing about what Kaynar was planning. Genuinely interested both in Dorn's daughter and the stolen goods, he was the perfect bait. He was set to meet the Skiratas after nightfall. Kaynar and Yaga took turns stalking him through the narrow, winding streets of Keldabe until he entered his drinking establishment of choice. Less than ten minutes after his entrance, one Mandalorian in green armor and another, shorter and thinner and wearing distinctive red, went through the same door. Dorn and Ninet Skirata, as promised.

So far, so good. All that was required now was to wait.

Waiting was hard. Kaynar knew what had to be done; fate had set him on this moment since he'd seen that recording on Chorax.

After tonight everything would be different. He'd make enemies of the Skiratas, yes, but he was prepared for that. The rest of Mandalore would see what he'd done, why he'd done it, and the long humiliation of Clan Auchs would be over. The scattered remnants of the family would be able to come together again. Yaga would no longer grow up ashamed of his father.

All Kaynar had to do was wait.

Tension wracked his body as he set himself in the dark alley across from the tapcaf. He slunk down against the alley wall until his bottom hit the ground, legs stretched out before him, head lolled to one side. Pedestrians who glanced into the shadows took him for a passed-out drunk. They couldn't see through his helmet, couldn't see him watching the tapcaf doors through the visor's night-vision scope. From his angle it was visible, but just barely; so much the better to hide.

His son took a different tack. Yaga was a nimble young man, even with the weight of his Verpine sniper rifle slung over his back. He hauled himself onto the roof of the one-storey building facing the tapcaf, lay flat on his stomach, and waited. The buildings in this old section of Keldabe were tightly packed, and he'd be able to cover a lot of rooftops when the time came.

As they waited Kaynar wished they'd placed a bug inside Vasur's helmet, just so they'd know when the Skiratas left the tapcaf. Instead he remained still as the passed-out drunk he pretended to be, even though his heart kept pounding blood and adrenaline through his body.

And then, after an interminable wait, they stepped out the door. Vasur hadn't come out yet; maybe he was getting another drink or maybe paying the tab. It didn't matter. Kaynar remained motionless as the two of them stood in front of the door for a moment, swaying just a little, as though knocked-off balance by their drinking. Then they started to the left. They passed Kaynar's alley and didn't even glance in his direction.

"You see them, *buir*?" Yaga whispered in his ear.

"Track them from the roof. I'll follow behind."

Carefully, he stood up and stretched the blood back into his limbs. Then he stepped into the street and turned to follow. There was little traffic in this part of town at this part of night, but he still had to be careful of witnesses. Everyone on Mandalore would know about this once it was done but he didn't want to risk bystanders intruding.

He followed them from a distance, letting them outpace him on several winds in the road so he didn't seem to be following. All the while Yaga crept across the rooftops, sometimes flinging his agile young body over narrow alleys to keep pace with them, warning his father every time they slowed their pace or made a turn.

As they followed Kaynar's confidence grew. The Skiratas were following the path expected, back toward the nearest landing zone, from which they probably planned to fly back to their clan's mountain hideaway. Kaynar knew exactly where to trap them and he told Yaga to hurry ahead.

A few narrow canals wound through Keldabe. Stone bridges arched over the waterways and the antique, unpaved towpaths running alongside them. As the Skiratas neared one Kaynar picked up his pace and let his vibro-knife slide gently into his cupped right hand, blade flat against palm.

"On your left, *buir*," Yaga told him.

"Good. Wait until I pass, then take out the big one."

"Understood."

Kaynar timed his approach so his steady pace passed the Skiratas just as they stepped onto the bridge's arch. He took them on the right flank, a meter away from the girl. That was when Yaga released his shot. The silencer on his rifle killed its sound but not the garbled cry from Dorn Skirata as the laser blast tore through the unprotected inside of his knee and dropped him.

Ninet stopped and reached for her father. Kaynar spun back on them and attacked fast. His left forearm cracked against the girl's bowed head, arching it back. He snapped the same arm again, this time cracking the flat edge of his hand against her windpipe and robbing her of breath. As she staggered, drunk and confused and

gasping for air, he grabbed Dorn by the chest-plates and, half-shoving and half-throwing, sent him over the bridge's low railing onto the towpath below.

By then Ninet was recovered. She reached for the blaster at her hip but Yaga was ready and blasted through the interior of her wrist with another silenced shot. Kaynar grabbed her, too, and threw her over the edge.

Drunk and wounded they were still Mandalorians, and as Kaynar jumped down to the towpath they were rising to their feet again. Yaga wouldn't have a good shot from this angle but Kaynar could handle these himself. He grasped the knife in his right hand and lunged. Dorn was slow to react and the blade sunk easily into his gut. He heard the girl scream for her father even as she lunged at him. Kaynar knocked her back with another snap of the elbow but she kept coming. That was when Yaga arrived; he threw himself over the bridge railing and fell right onto Ninet's back. As they both fell to the ground Kaynar spun on Dorn, now sunk to his knees, one hand clutching the bleeding wound in his side while his other fumbled for the gun. Kaynar kicked his hand away.

"Which one of you was it?" Kaynar called aloud. "Who killed Gevern Auchs?"

"Who gives a *shab*?" Dorn hacked. "Who *are* you?"

Kaynar wrenched off the man's helmet and looked down on his pain-twisted face. Dorn looked up; there was no recognition in his eyes. But then, there wouldn't be. Not even his brothers had thought much of Kaynar Auchs.

Then the wounded Mandalorian's face went slack. His body tipped off-balance and fell to the side. His hand released his stomach and more blood flowed out. It pooled and trickled over the towpath's edge to join the slow pulse of the canal.

The girl, pinned down by Yaga, shouted for her father. Panic and anger gave her strength; she threw back the younger boy but Kaynar was ready for her. He grabbed her outstretched arm, kicked her front leg out from under her, and threw her hard onto the dirt beside her father. He dropped his armored body on top of her, pinning her arms beneath his legs, and wrenched off her helmet

too. Ambient city light looked smooth and silver on her young face, but even here he knew she was the one he'd seen on the holo-recording.

He pressed the edge of his blade where throat met jaw, drawing a trickle of blood. "I know you were on Chorax. I know you were there when Gevern Auchs died. Who killed him? Was it your father? Was it *you*?"

He watched Ninet's eyes and saw the final moments of her life. He saw a hundred questions flash through those eyes, and the realization that none of them mattered. Despair might have followed; instead they filled with spite.

"I killed the *chakaar*," she sneered. "I'd do it a thousand times over."

Kaynar tilted the angle of the blade and pressed down, through skin, through cartilage and blood vessels. A jet of arterial spray splashed across his helmet, covering his visor. Her dying body jerked beneath his but didn't throw him off. When it finally went still, he pocketed his knife and used the soft underside of his arm to wipe clear enough blood to see.

When he got to his feet and turned around Yaga was there, watching. Behind him, a half-dozen men and women stood watching on the bridge. None of them moved or said a word.

The moment Kaynar had been preparing for these past eight years- unconsciously for so long, only realizing it at the end- was over. He felt empty and still inside.

When he realized that they all expected him to say something, even Yaga, he needed a moment to find the words. "This was an honorable punishment. These were traitors. The *Mand'alor* has been avenged.

"My name is Kaynar Auchs and they killed my brother. It was blood for blood. That's all that matters."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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In the scattered seconds when he wasn't diving and juking away from attacks by other Sith, Darth Terrid marveled at how badly he'd failed. He'd planned for a betrayal by Darth Saydel; not *expected* it but at least anticipated the possibility. Even there he'd gotten it wholly wrong. He'd been certain that Saydel would use her opportunity to annihilate Sheddu Maad, along with Wyyrlok and Krayt. It wasn't her nature to be servile; he still couldn't believe she'd chosen loyalty to the dreaming Dark Lord over greater ambition, but it was clear she'd done exactly that.

He couldn't indulge in self-pity or regret, not when two Furies were bearing down on him. They'd chased him close to Orelon's atmosphere and the cloudscape spread out beneath them like a red and brown ocean. He couldn't tell which other Sith were on his tail but he could feel their angry determination to kill the traitor. He threw himself into loops and twists and hard turns that made blackness crawl at the edges of his vision but still he couldn't escape them, and when his sensors showed an Alliance ship approaching he immediately ran for it.

As he pulled up and jumped skyward he immediately spotted the great bulk of the troop carrier. It was making a dramatic belly-flop into the cloud ocean with the aim of locking its ventral cargo



hatch with the loyalist station and bringing as many people aboard as possible. Terrid no longer cared about stopping them but he dropped his targeting reticules on it and fired anyway.

The carrier's weapons turrets finally noticed the three Furies darting toward them and opened fire. They didn't discriminate between Terrid and his enemies but at their far range the turbolasers accomplished nothing except to force his pursuers behind him to break formation.

It wasn't much, but it would have to do. Terrid kept charging the troop ship, spotting turbolaser fire and slipping around every blast, while the Furies tried to continue their pursuit. When he spotted a flight of dart-shaped Tri-wing interceptors vectoring toward him, his heart lifted. He dodged their initial volleys, targeted one, and punched through its shields with a single torpedo. He plunged through the fireball and continued accelerating toward the carrier while, behind him, the pursuing Furies were forced to tangle with the remaining Tri-wings. A few Alliance interceptors came back to chase him but he barely noticed. He aimed for the carrier and pushed his speed to maximum.

He found the Force, even through his panic and rattled nerves. He put his hand on his seat's ejection controls and, two seconds before his fighter slammed into the carrier's shields, he pulled the lever hard.

His fighter, magazines still near-full with shadow bombs, created a stunning explosion when it hit the shields. The concussive wave would have turned Terrid's every bone to mush but as his ejection seat tumbled out, he called on the Force and erected an invisible shield around himself for the crucial second.

And then he was falling, straight down toward the broad station surface. The ejection seat's built-in repulsorjets struggling to counteract the gas giant's immense gravity and he had to call on the Force to cushion his impact. Even then he landed hard enough to smash in the bottom of the ejection chair. Pain stabbed through his right leg, the chair tipped, and he tumbled hard onto the metal hull.

He worked to disentangle himself from the crash webbing. He was still alive; when he looked up he saw the massive carrier

lowering itself to couple with its target but no Furies or Tri-wings still trying to kill him. The repulsors that kept the station hovering inside Orelon VI's atmosphere also counteracted the planet's strong gravity; were it not for that his bones and organs would have already been crushed. He tried to stand, almost rose to full height, then pitched forward on hands and knees as blinding pain shot up from his leg. He rolled into his back and tried to examine it through his vac suit. He felt no major breaks, but knew some bones must be dangerously fractured.

Exhaustion overtook him. Terrid sprawled on his back and stared up at the Alliance carrier that filled half his vision, at the thin clouds of the upper air and the sparks of distant explosions high above. And he knew that none of them mattered because he'd already failed. In his obsessive drive to be better and stronger and fiercer than any other Sith he'd created the mechanism for his own destruction. Now he was betrayed and badly wounded, trapped on the outside of a station about to be blown to atoms with no ship and no chance to escape through a space swarming with ships that all wanted him dead.

For a moment there seemed no reason to do anything but lie here, watch the swirling skies, and wait to die.

But the moment passed. He might have been a fool but he was still a Sith, and Sith did not surrender. He felt the supply pouch at his waist it and found his lightsaber. He'd need it to cut his way inside the station. He didn't know what he'd do once inside, but he'd manage something. He'd survive a little longer and that was the small victory he needed, the only one he could get.

When the signal from Darth Maleth rippled through his battle-meld, it was what Kheykid had been waiting for. During the fight to destroy the shield generator he'd focused furiously on the task at hand, knowing all the while that once it was done this mission would turn truly dangerous, pitting Sith against Sith. He'd hoped to delay that moment until they were close to *Intruder* or at least clear of the Hapan soldiers that were pursuing them, but they were not that fortunate.

Instead they were trapped in a corridor, pinned between squadrons and battling back lasers from both sides. When Maleth's mind touched his Darth Kheykid faltered but Inexor, right behind him, moved true. The four-armed Codru-Ji danced around a volley of blasts with disarming grace and began hacking away at the loyalists with four swords.

Kheykid looked to the other end just as one desperate woman tossed a grenade at the cluster of Sith. Darth Morlid was fast; she caught the sphere in midair, threw it back to the soldier, raised a Force wall to shield them from the concussive blast that rocked the company corridor so hard it dented walls outward.

Ruyn and Vurik stood right behind her but weren't even paying attention. They were looking back at Kheykid with realization in their eyes, asking silently if now was the time to attack.

That was when the Barabel realized what he should have already. Maleth's power to link minds was so strong he could send his message only to those he'd chosen to; only those who were still loyal to Lord Krayt.

Morlid and Inexor were unaware, but that wouldn't last long. He gave Ruyn and Vurik a tiny nod, and they turned to face Morlid. And Kheykid spun around to initiate the fight he'd dreaded.

Inexor had just finished hacking down the last loyalist soldier. His back was turned and Kheykid couldn't hesitate. He jumped forward and thrust his right blade toward the Codru-Ji's back. Warning came to Inexor but not in time; he skirted to the right but Kheykid's red sword skimmed his left side and cut a burning hole beneath his ribs.

Kheykid dug the claws of his feet into the deck to keep from overbalancing. Inexor jumped back, spun to face the Barabel, and for a second their eyes met past the blaze of their sabers. There was no anger or hurt in the Codru-Ji's eyes; after all, he'd planned to do the same. What Kheykid saw was *embarrassment* at failing to strike first.

Inexor lashed out with his upper set of lightsabers. Kheykid dropped low, onto all fours, and snapped his wounded tail as hard as he could. Inexor leaped above it and propelled himself over

Kheykid's back; his lower-right lightsaber lashed down but the Barabel dropped beneath it and rolled onto his back, raising his left arm as she did so. His short blade slipped above Inexor's and cut the hand off at the elbow. Inexor cried out in pain but when his feet hit deck he managed to keep himself upright.

Kheykid got back to his feet as Inexor lunged. The Codru-Ji was too close to use his upper blades and Kheykid caught his remaining lower sword and pushed it back. He surged full upward, slamming Inexor into the wall, and as the Codru-ji tried to swing his upper-left blade down onto Kheykid's spine, the Barabel opened his jaws and sunk his teeth into the opposite arm. Even as he felt Inexor writhe and tasted blood he felt the hot, searing pain of one lightsaber digging into his abdomen and cutting through his lowest rib.

Pain made him bite down harder and he wrenched his head to one side. Inexor howled like an animal as Kheykid staggered back, arm still twitching in his jaws while the Codru-Ji jetted blood from the stump of his upper shoulder.

That was when Darth Ruyn found his chance. The Twi'lek stepped up behind his stunned and staggered enemy and took Darth Inexor's head off with a high horizontal swipe. The head fell first, and the body dropped after it, still pumping blood out from its gaping arm-socket.

Behind Ruyn, Darth Vurik stood over Darth Morlid's smoking corpse. He was a young Lord and his eyes were wide with shock at what he'd done, but Ruyn's attention fell on Kheykid's wound.

"Are you badly injured?" the Twi'lek asked.

He felt the pain still shooting out from the sound on his side and slumped against the wall. He spat out Inexor's arm and carefully ran his claw-tips over the burnt opening. The lightsaber cauterized the wounds it made, and this one did not seem to have pierced any organs. It still hurt, horrifically, but he was a Sith. Pain was his fuel. It would have to be, if he was to get out of here alive.

"I fare better than they," Kheykid rasped and looked down on Morlid and Inexor. "But forget them now. We must hurry."

"To *Intruder*?" asked Vurik.

"If we are lucky," he hissed, "But I suspect it's already taken."

When the time for betrayal came Kroan got his warning. It wasn't the signal he'd been expecting but it was just enough to save his life. He and Darth Heyd had been standing guard by the auxiliary airlock, watching for enemies that never came, feeling distant ripples in the Force that informed them of all that was going on elsewhere. Standing side-by-side they tensed as the other Sith engaged the Jedi, felt relief when the shields fell, and share the surge of confidence that Darth Maleth spread through his battle meld.

But when Darth Heyd breathed in a tiny gasp, Kroan felt nothing at all. His mind worked fast. There was only one real difference between him and the Duros on this mission. Maleth shouldn't have known that difference, but if he did it explained everything.

Kroan didn't know for certain, but if he hesitated he was a dead man.

He grabbed his lightsaber a second before Heyd reached for his. He ignited it and swung it upward just as the Duros thumbed on his switch. There was no chance. Kroan's swipe cut upward across his torso, from hip to shoulder, and Heyd collapsed instantly.

The split-second's exertion left Kroan breathing hard as he stared down at the corpse of the other Sith Lord. He didn't know how things had been reversed so badly but it didn't matter. Kroan had been a fool to cast his lot in with that arrogant Chiss upstart. The temptation of being a *real* Sith again, molding galactic history as he'd done before, had cost him everything except his life.

No, he had one more thing left. He looked at the open airlock portal and the dark bay of *Intruder* beyond. He'd paid attention to Kheykid's flying on the way in and was confident he knew how to pilot it out. There might be a massive firefight going on overhead but with this ship he was confident he'd be able to slip away unharassed.

Where he'd go after that was another issue entirely. The Jedi had severed his connection with Kuat and robbed him of his power by birthright. His corporation had declared him dead years ago and

absorbed all his assets. He could think of only one ally left, an ally almost as desperate as he was, but they might offer a chance to rebuild, or at least temporary respite.

Kroan looked down at Darth Heyd's flat dead face and felt nothing. He bent down, plucked the Duros' lightsaber off the ground, and hurried through the airlock.

When everything they'd been afraid of happened in an instant, it was to Admiral Lekwash's credit that he didn't hesitate even as panic gripped his crew. Seen from the tactical display the situation looked dire: new Hapan warships were emerging from the Mists surrounding the system and making fast micro-jumps to Orelon VI. A trio of double-disc Battle Dragons had placed themselves at the rear of the Alliance line to block any escape to hyperspace. Admiral Vahl's ships, which had spread an open channel to allow the empty carriers passage for the planet, were constricting formation and tightening the net on the Alliance line from all sides. At the same time the first two Alliance carriers had already reached Orelon VI and were starting to draw in loyalist evacuees. Their heavily-shielded hulls would protect the station for orbital fire for a time, but too many Hapan ships were bearing down on them.

It was an unwinnable scenario and just looking at it Allana froze in terror, but Admiral Lekwash immediately started barking orders. He commanded the ships at the rear of the Alliance line to turn and begin attacking the three Battle Dragons behind them. The ships that had just passed through Admiral Vahl's net began pushing forward to Orelon VI with orders to defend the two carriers as long as possible.

"You've split our fleet in two," Allana whispered as she and the Quarren watched it all play out on the tactical holo. *Bright Union* hadn't come under enemy fire yet, but it was just now pivoting to attack the three Battle Dragons. Past the bridge Allana could see the first explosive bursts as Alliance and Hapan ships joined in combat for the first time since the Secession almost forty years ago. It was everything she hadn't wanted to see.

"Vahl will have to split her own forces to fight both our battle groups. We have enough firepower to punch past those Battle Dragons and get most of our ships out of here." His small eyes slipped sideways and caught hers. "I was sent here to save lives, not start a war."

"I know. But what about the ships stuck at the planet?"

"They'll cover the carriers while they load up as many people as they can, but there's no way they can take in a hundred thousand. My *hope* is that they'll be able to break out and escape once they're full. If not-" His face-tentacles curled in distaste. "Those loyalists were dead already. We at least had to try."

Allana thought of Jade and Tanith down there. She knew they'd stay selflessly behind until as many as possible got away, just like Katia, Taryn, and Zekk forty years ago. The thought of losing them too was almost unbearable.

But trapped here, with Admiral Vahl's fleet already forming a wall between her and the planet, there was nothing she could do. Nothing except reach across that distance with an invisible touch and say she was sorry.

They were trying to load a hundred thousand desperate people into two ships meant for half as many and the result was total chaos. The great portals connecting the station to the troop carriers were wide enough to fit three *Jade Shadows* flying side-by-side, and Alliance soldiers were doing their best to hurry people up the ramps and into the ships' great bowels. Jade had no idea where those escaping Sith had gone. She couldn't even see the other two surviving Jedi in the great sea of people that filled the loading area. She only knew they hadn't been trampled by the tenuous Force-link that bound their minds together. All three women were trying to direct the flow of shoving, shouting people but over so much clamor no single voice could be heard above the bedlam.

In the midst of it all, Jade felt her cousin reach across the distance of embattled space and offer an aching apology. Jade had no idea what was going on outside the station, just that it was bad,

and Allana's touch explained nothing. All it offered was a farewell and a faint hope, a plea, that they'd meet again.

The touch was gone quickly, and despite its sorrow Jade felt lifted. In that parting she'd sensed Allana's concern for her, yes, but not for herself. That meant one of them would probably get out of this alive, which was something.

Then it was back to trying to direct the stream. Jade continued to shout and wave people toward one access point or another but she wasn't a big woman and she was constantly jostled on all sides. Across the sea of heads she spotted a blazing lightsaber held high-blue, probably Balm's- and felt the shock of the Hapans around it. Putting the fear of the Jedi in them was a smart move and Jade reached for her own saber to do the same. Just as her hand found the weapon she realized the comlink in her pocket was buzzing and probably had been for the past few minutes.

Shee pulled it out, held it close to hear, and said, "This is Jade. Can you get this?"

"This is Tanith. Is that your lightsaber I see?"

"No, but I was about to fire mine up. Where are you?" It was impossible to pick out any single head in this crowd, even Tanith's bright red one.

"In the back. It doesn't matter. Jade, we've got a problem. Reshul and the other Duchas were in the situation room when the evac ships came. They're stuck down at section.... C29."

Jade tried to dig up her mental map of the station when someone shoved her hard, almost knocking her off her feet. She clung to the comlink with her right hand, awkwardly drew out her lightsaber with her left, and stabbed its violet blade toward the ceiling.

Now people started giving her edge room. She heard Tanith's tinny voice say, "I can see you."

"Then you can see I'm kind of stuck here. What do you want me to do?"

"Jade, Reshul and the other Duchas are important. When the loyalists come to New Hapes they'll need leaders and-"



"I'm sorry, I just *can't* get to them." It might not have been a very Jedi-like sentiment but she didn't feel like shedding tears for stubborn old nobles left behind.

"Wait," Tanith pressed, "The *Chalks* are with them too."

Jade cursed aloud. Maybe it also wasn't Jedi-like to care about the lives of Force-users over those of normal people, but she couldn't help it. In the brief time she'd gotten to talk with Elliah and Hogrum she'd seen their potential, not just to grow in the Force but to grow free of the stagnant society they'd clearly grown to hate.

And then, like a miracle, her comlink sounded with a new chime. She knew that one, even against the din, because she'd programmed it to sound only when receiving a transmission from *Starlight Champion*.

"Is there some emergency airlock they can get to?" she asked Tanith before switching over. "I've got an idea."

On the tense and too-long ride from Hutt Space to the Hapes Cluster, Roan Fel was stuck with a lot of questions. He wondered what was so urgent they'd had to race here for, what business three Imperial Knights had doing apparent Jedi deeds, and whether his uncle's mad action might get him killed. The moment *Starlight Champion* reverted to realspace he got his answers all at once and he didn't like any of them.

Arlen had dropped them in the middle of a fiery brawl between a trio of double-disc Hapan Battle Dragons and a cluster of lumpy Alliance Mon Cal cruisers. He'd forgotten what a good pilot his uncle was; the Jedi nimbly wove his awkward ship around a flight of Miy'tils that were just as shocked and confused by their appearance as Roan was, then veered out of the battle zone and set a straight course for the brown and red gas giant that lay ahead. The Orelon system was awkwardly placed inside a pocket of the Transitory Mists that cut off hyperspace travel and veiled most of the Hapes Cluster from outside observation, which meant that just as there was only one way into this place there'd be only one way out. As he peered over Arlen's shoulder from the back of the cockpit, Roan saw lots more he didn't like. A fleet of Hapan warships had

surrounded the planet on all sides and he spotted a cluster of explosions in the gas giant's low orbit that seemed to mark a pitched battle.

Treis, seated beside Roan, asked the question for him. "What in the hell *is* all that?"

Nat Skywalker had taken the co-pilot's seat after they'd moved Mohrgan to the infirmary, and the Jedi apprentice glanced over *Champion's* sensor readings. "Looks like two Alliance troop carriers are docked with the station. Probably loading up passengers. I see a couple more Alliance ships plus a few other ones forming a shield in low orbit."

"I'm guessing those are loyalists," said Arlen.

"They've got Hapan ships on all sides," Nat added. "They look like they're trying to punch through and knock out the station."

"And we want to get *closer*?" Roan gaped.

"Maybe. Nat, can you patch a hail to your mom?"

"I'll try," the apprentice said, and started punching commands into the comm console.

When the voice came on it was so marred by static Roan had to lean close and tear his attention off the battle to make sense of it.

"Arlen..... that you?" a woman said.

"Mom, it's me!" Nat cried. "We're heading your way. Can you hear us?"

"Nat... have Arlen?"

"Right here," the Jedi Master called. "What's your sitrep?"

"...evacuating.... -eed help..."

"Who needs help?" Nat asked. "Mom, how can we reach you?"

"Not me," Jade Skywalker said. "Get.... into clouds, find emergency airlock-"

"*What* airlock?" Nat called against the static. "Who are we getting?"

"-lock 24D. Twenty-four levels down.... Northwest edge. Got it?"

"We'll handle it," Arlen called, and killed the transmission from his console.

"Wait!" bleated Nat. "We didn't hear everything."

"We heard enough to do what she wants."

"But we don't know-"

"We'll find out the rest when we get there," Roan said. "Worrying about everything else will only distract us."

The apprentice glared back at him but said nothing. Worrying about his mother was understandable but these Jedi weren't like Imperial Knights. They weren't trained as soldiers and didn't know how to prioritize in combat situations, which meant Roan and Treis would have to take charge when they reached their destination.

He just hoped whoever they were rescuing was worth all this.

*Starlight Champion* had the advantage of being a small and unfamiliar craft, and as they approached the planet from the side opposite the besieged loyalist station they attracted little attention from the Hapan Nova cruisers spread wide in mid-orbit. After passing the initial enemy line Arlen took them on a dive toward the planet so steep it pinned Roan to the back of his chair. The gas giant's strong gravity drew them in extra-fast and Arlen kept plunging them straight toward the clouds. For a second Roan thought his Jedi uncle was going to drop them right into the planet's swirling storms and get them all crushed by the pressure.

Right before they hit the cloud deck Arlen jerked the throttle back and levelled them out. This time Roan's stomach nearly dropped through his lap but once he got past the strain and nausea they were sailing clear and straight through the misty upper clouds.

Reckless. That was what his father always called Arlen. It had been so long since Roan had seen his uncle that he'd forgotten how reckless he could be.

Even at max atmospheric speeds it took them too long to get close to the station. Roan first spotted the flash of distant explosions and laserfire, then watched the battle creep up from over the horizon and rise high in the sky. The Alliance and loyalist ships were making a valiant effort to hold back the Hapans, but as the jutting forms of the troop carriers finally appeared over the horizon, the first Hapan turbolasers finally started breaching the defensive line. Roan watched as a few mighty green lances fell from the sky

and cut through the clouds, narrowly missing the carriers as they sat docked over the station.

All they could see of the station itself was the bulge of its uppermost levels as they emerged from the clouds. The rest of it swelled invisibly for hundreds of meters beneath, and with its shields gone all the old station had was its armor-plated and pressurized hull to resist the powerful currents of Orelon VI's mighty storms.

"Mom said northwest side, twenty-four levels down," Nat reminded.

"Don't worry, I've got it," Arlen said as he gripped the control throttle tight. At their speed they'd reach the station in under a minute, assuming another spear of turbolaser fire didn't fall from on high and vaporize them.

"Twenty-four *down*?" Treis asked. "Won't that take us into the clouds?"

"Yeah, hope not too deep." Arlen bit his lip. "Shields up, Nat?"

"Shields up."

"Then here we go." He pushed the throttle forward and sent them into a dive.

Roan gripped the arms of his chair tight and this time his stomach tried to escape through his mouth. The cloud-ocean swallowed them up and reduced visible to zero. As shapeless swathes of pastel red and browns drifted around their window Roan felt strong currents buffet the ship even as they decelerated.

The station appeared before them like a giant gray wall. Arlen killed the engines and swung them off a collision course, then began to crawl parallel to the surface, just meters above.

Clouds still churned around them and the throttle bucked in Arlen's hands as he said, "Someone *please* tell me when you spot an airlock."

Nat, already half-risen from his seat, stabbed a finger outward. "I see something!"

Roan couldn't catch it from his backseat angle but Arlen nodded. "I've got it. Looks like an airlock to me. Just hope it's the right damn one..."

As Arlen wrestled his ship under control and brought it around to couple with the airlock, Roan reached out with the Force. He could sense people on the other side of the station's thick gray wall, lots of scared, frantic people. He had no idea how many, but he thought he could make out two minds a little clearer than the others.

"I think we've got it," he announced.

"Good to hear," Arlen grunted as *Champion's* hull grated against the station exterior. The ship trembled one more time and he announced, "There we go! Locked in!"

Now that the cockpit was still, Roan unbuckled his crash webbing and rose. Then everything shook again, so hard it threw him off his feet and into Treis. Both Knights went tumbling into Roan's seat.

"I thought we were locked in!" Roan shouted as Treis pushed himself off.

"We are! That was a turbolaser blast! They just landed a good one on the station," Arlen said. "Listen, Mohrgan's injured and I'm staying at the controls. Nat, Roan, Treis, you've got to get everyone on board you can? Understood?"

"Understood," announced Nat. As Treis and Roan were still trying to extricate from each other the Jedi boy grabbed his lightsaber and sprinted out of the cockpit.

Once the two Imperial Knights were standing they hurried after him. Roan felt a spike of embarrassment as he watched his younger cousin- the undisciplined Jedi apprentice- take charge of the situation by manually unlocking and opened *Champion's* hatch. He and Treis followed Skywalker through the airlock and into the doomed station.

When the three teenage knights opened the airlock's second doors and entered the chamber they found themselves facing a room packed with at least two dozen people. They were mostly older, mostly women. Many were dressed in layered gowns that looked criminally expensive and frankly ridiculous, especially when they were all messy and disheveled from the frantic flight to the airlock. When Roan scanned their faces he saw surprise wash over

the group, then incredulity, then a bit of fear as they started noticing the lightsabers dangling from the three young mens' belts.

Nat was the one who pushed the other two clear of the doorway, breathed deep, and announced with impressive volume, "We're here to rescue you! Please make an orderly line through the airlock and into our ship!"

The line wasn't orderly but at least it moves fast as the old Hapan woman picked up their layers skirts and hurried for the exit. That was when Roan noticed the dirty water pooling on the floor that stained the rims of the nobles' dresses and rippled around the base of his boots. He realized that this station had to have a water reservoir and the turbolaser fire must have cracked it open.

As the first nobles hurried through the airlock the entire station quaked under another turbolaser hit. A cry from the back of the room announced more water rushing in and Roan felt it surge halfway up his calves.

He, Treis, and Nat did what they could do direct the flow of people. Treis saw an old woman knocked to her knees by the tremor and rushed to help her. Roan made his way toward the back of the chamber to get a better count of the evacuees. There was about thirty, and he hoped Arlen's ship could hold that many.

Another turbolaser shot rocked the station, not as hard as the last one, but it sent an even greater rush of water into the room. It swirled like an undercurrent and Roan grabbed onto the closest Hapan, a male servant, to keep both of them from falling. The water swelled up toward his waist and he pushed the servant toward the exit. Treis was nowhere to be seen but hopefully aboard *Champion* and Nat was by the airlock, helping people through.

Just a minute or two more, Roan thought, but when he looked behind him he saw one black-haired woman trying to push against the gushing water for a hallway leading deeper into the station. Roan lurched for her and grabbed her by the upper arm.

"What do you think you're doing?" he shouted. "We have to go!"

When she turned around he saw she was just a girl, the same age as him. "He's still back there! My brother!"

Roan looked down the hallway. The lights had gone out and he could see in the darkness was water was pulsing through the corridor into the airlock vestibule.

The girl jerked her arm free and stared down the corridor again. Roan staggered after her even as water rose up to his hips. "I don't see anyone!" he called.

"He's up ahead! I can feel him!"

The door on the corridor's far end slid open. Even more water gushed through and so did the barely-visible form of another person, probably a boy a few years younger than the girl. The boy started sloshing through the water with big awkward steps and his sister was almost with him when the corridor shook more violently than ever.

Water crashed off one wall, crested, and tumbled back down, soaking all three of them through their clothes. Beneath the crashing Roan heard the groan and twist of metal as vibrations shook the deck, but before he could give a warning a bulkhead burst open. He reached out with the Force, grabbed the girl, and pulled her two steps back as a supper girder came crashing down and lodged diagonally from floor to ceiling, separating her from her brother.

They started shouting for each other but Roan called, "Get back!" and drew his lightsaber. He silently thanked whoever'd designed the thing to be waterproof and made two quick cuts. The fallen support beam collapsed in three pieces, allowing the boy to climb over its ruin and embrace his sister as the water pulsed around their waists.

"Come on!" Roan insisted, grabbing the girl by the shoulder and taking her brother too.

As they trudged through the water the girl asked, "Are you a Jedi too?"

"An Imperial Knight." For some reason he felt compelled add, "My name is Roan Fel."

Normally that was enough to put respect and a little fear in people's eyes. He'd grown up with it, gotten used to it, and maybe even liked it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten a look

as blank as the one the girl was giving him now. He'd thought even Hapan loyalists would have seen the news sometimes in the past eight years.

"I'm Elliah, this is Hogrum," she said as they reached the vestibule chamber. Nat was waving the last stragglers through the partially-flooded airlock portal and looked relieved when he spotted Roan.

"Is that all of them?" Skywalker called.

Roan looked at Elliah. "Is it?"

"We're the last ones," Hogrum said as he hacked up a mouthful of water.

"Great," Nat said as he helped them through the airlock. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Darth Kheykid chose to see it as a sign of gratitude that Darth Maleth sent a shuttle to retrieve the three remaining Sith. The attempt by the Alliance to evacuate its population had produced a chaotic firefight overhead. Hapan Miy'tils and Sith Furies battled with Alliance Tri-wings. Turbolaser fire from Nova cruisers in low orbit tore smoking gouges out of the station's hull but hadn't yet pierced the shields of the Alliance carriers. In all that chaos it wasn't difficult for one armed shuttle from admiral Vahl's flagship to slip into the clouds.

Kheykid, Ruyn, and Vurik met their ride at the same airlock where they'd left *Intruder*. It enraged the Barabel to think that his precious ship had been stolen by a traitor but there was nothing to be done for it now.

When the airlock opened they were ushered into a shuttle by a handful of Hapan guards who looked curiously nonplussed to see a Barabel, a Twi'lek, and a Chev in torn black robes with fierce tattoos across their faces. Clearly, these were part of the queen's most loyal guard.

As soon as they were aboard, the shuttle detached and began to rise out of the clouds. Kheykid, wounded though he was, managed to stagger into the cockpit in time to see them lift clear into the sky. He watched with satisfaction as two more turbolaser blasts fell into



the top cloud-drifts, impacted on the station and sent up geysers of smoke and flame. A few more good shots and they'd likely knock off the repulsor-systems and send the whole thing tumbling to Orelon VI's distant core.

Kheykid wrapped his claws around the back of the pilot's seat. "I need to speak with *Black Majesty*."

The pilot complied without a word, and when the holo sprung to life it showed Darth Maleth's long-haired, tattoo-lined face. These vermin were well-informed.

"It is done," the Barabel hissed. "We are on our way back. Were all the traitor's starfighters destroyed? Including Terrid's?"

"Yes. All of them."

It was a victory, but he wasn't satisfied. "What about *Intruder*?"

"It eluded us. Who was aboard?"

"Darth Kroan."

"I don't see him giving us trouble, not by himself."

Kheykid growled deep in his throat. Maleth was probably right; Kroan had made few friends on Shedua Maad. Likely he'd fly back to his old allies in the Empire or on Kuat, or whatever other vermin would tolerate his wounded vanity.

"I look forward to seeing you soon, Lord Kheykid," Maleth said.

"As do I. Until then."

Kheykid tapped a claw on the comm control and shut the connection off. The shuttle rose further and he watched as faint starlight grew brighter overhead. The damage he'd taken against Inexor and the loss of *Intruder* had wounded his own vanity, but he reminded himself that a true One Sith should be beyond those things. His purpose was to serve Darth Krayt's design, and in that regard today had been a triumphant success. With the unlikely aid of Darth Saydel they'd purged all the would-be traitors from their order, leaving it leaner and stronger and more dangerous than before.

As they ascended into space he felt himself being drawn into Darth Maleth's battle-meld. He felt the minds of all the other One Sith touch his own and savored their shared delight as they welcomed him home.

\* \* \*

Jade had always intended to stay behind once the Alliance troop carriers pushed off, but by the time they closed their gates the entire station was shuddering from the repeated impact of heavy turbolaser fire. She didn't know what it would take to knock out the repulsorlift generators and send them plunging irretrievably into the clouds, but the death blow could come at any time.

Even with the carriers packed with more than their design capacity, allowed there were still tens of thousands of loyalists trapped on the station with no hope of escape. As the last wave of people marshalled to go aboard the carriers, it fell to Tanith Zel and the Jedi to undertake the awful task of deciding who they could fit aboard *Jade Shadow*. With three blazing lightsabers behind her to command attention, Tanith crawled atop a storage crate and called those remaining to attention.

"There no more time to argue or delay," the woman called, so loud everyone trapped in the vast chamber could hear. "We have one ship left, with only enough space for a handful of people. Please, I *beg* you, send their children forward to be saved! Give us your daughters *and* your sons and I promise we will get them to safety! If you want your children to live, send them up *now*!"

The mighty loading doors closed as the Alliance carriers pushed off the entire station rattled but Jade barely notice, so transfixed was she by the heartrending sights before her. Parents dropped to their knees weeping and embraced their sons and daughters, many of whom looked too young to have known any home except this dying prison. Children too small to even walk were passed to older ones by tearful parents. Valiss and Balm clutched babies to their breasts, handed over by weeping mothers who'd placed their last hope in two Jedi. Jade felt the last remnants of her resentment for these people- buried so deep after her own mother's death and survived so long- finally dissolve to nothing. None of these children deserved to lose their parents so young. None of the adults, however errant or blameful their loyalties, deserved the death they'd been given.

"We may have only minutes left! We have to take action!" Tanith seemed to be summoning Allana's volume and power of command. "Those of you to the right, clear the path now! Let us pass through! Let your *children* escape safely!"

After the madness of the rush to escape on the carriers, Jade would never have imagined those left to die could summon the order required. Somehow they did. Tanith stretched an arm straight to the auxiliary hangar entrance on the far side of the chamber and the crowd parted like two receding waves. Valiss and Balm hurried into the gap, sabers still lofted high as their carried babies in their other hands. The assembled children scampered to follow. Another great tremor shook the station but Tanith remained atop the crate, pointing the way for the remaining children. When the last of them finally passed ahead and Valiss opened the door to *Shadow's* hangar bay, the Hapan woman finally jumped down and joined Jade in hurrying for the exit.

And as they marched to leave, they passed through the heart of the crowd. Women and men who'd been panicked and screaming just ten minutes ago now watched their children and the Jedi walk past in silence. It was the silence of mourning and reverence both and as she walked Jade couldn't look away from the faces of all those readying themselves to die, couldn't flinch from the resignation and dignity in their eyes. For all these Hapan loyalists believed and represented, all they'd supported, all they'd done, they'd found a way to meet their final moments with fortitude and safeguard the future. It was all Jade could do to keep from weeping in front of them.

And then she and Tanith passed into the auxiliary hangar. *Jade Shadow* was there. The huge crowd of children were pooled around it but didn't move close. Valiss and Balm stood between the children and the ship but they'd dropped into combat stances and their sabers now dipped forward, toward the single figure standing beneath *Jade Shadow's* nose.

He wore a tattered black flight suit and he clutched an unlit lightsaber in one hand. His posture was stiff and awkward, all the weight shifted to one leg. His black-haired head was bowed forward

but as Jade stepped close it lifted so she could see his familiar blue face and blazing red eyes.

Jade held her violet blade in front of her but didn't move closer. Darth Terrid held her stare across the short distance. Then, with a flick of the arm, he sent his lightsaber skidding across the deck until it tapped against her boots. The simple motion unbalanced him and he pitched forward onto his hands and knees. Through the Force Jade could feel the pain emanating from his broken leg and filling his body.

With effort, Terrid pushed himself upright and looked at her from his knees. Sweat gleamed on his face and his voice strained in agony as he said, "I surrender to *you*, Jade Skywalker. Do with me what you wish."

The fighting retreat of the Alliance fleet had succeeded in knocking out the three Battle Dragons arranged to block them, but even as ship after ship started jumping to hyperspace, away from the Orelon deathtrap, *Bright Union* lingered on the system's edge to watch how the end played out.

For Allana it was grim viewing. The twin troops carriers had been packed over capacity with people and lurched slowly out from Orelon VI's strong gravity well. The few battered Alliance and loyalist ships left to defend them did so bravely, even as the bulk of the Hapan fleet bore down on them. From their far distance Allana could only watch and wait. Her connection with Jade in the Force was dim and strained but still there and she dread the moment of its winking out forever.

Even as the carriers broke away from the planet, many Hapan ships stayed low over Orelon VI to deliver the killing blows to the station. From *Bright Union*, so many thousands of miles away, its death looked like an anticlimax. One moment its beacon was there, the next it wasn't, and Allana knew the repulsorlifts must have finally failed and the mighty facility was plunging deep toward the gas giant's core, where it would be crushed and ripped apart by the pressure of its storms. She felt a faint tremor through the Force as tens of thousands of lives were extinguished.

She felt another a second later and a glance at *Union's* tactical holo revealed the truth she already knew. Pinned down by a pair of Battle Dragons, one of the carriers had been unable to evade, suffered grievous damage, and finally exploded, taking all live aboard. And shortly after that a Mon Cal frigate, packed with brave Alliance crew who'd be whisked away on a supposedly simply retrieval mission, crumpled beneath broadsides by two Nova cruisers and burst into flames. Thousands more died and with a sinking feeling Allana wondered if more loyalists would die today or more Alliance crew. The Hapan exiles would take the blame for all those Alliance dead. Allana would also take blame and, irrational as it was, the *Jedi* would take the blame too.

The one cruel upside was that the remaining fighting ships were able to form a protective barrier around the last carrier. The whole bridge crew on *Bright Union* watched, tense and breathless, as the tight formation punched past a set of Nova cruisers arrayed to block them and pushed away from Orelon VI's gravity well. And, to Allana's amazement and relief, she still felt Jade in the Force.

As Admiral Lekwash asked the comm lieutenant to patch him a line with the fleeing carrier, Allana went over to an ensign and said, "I need you to hail a ship for me. Can you do that?"

The young Sullustan nodded. "Do you have the transponder ID?"

*Jade Shadow's* alpha-numeric calling code hadn't changed in sixty years. Allana knew it by heart and recited it. A few seconds later she heard a voice that made her knees weak with relief.

"We hear you, *Bright Union*," Jade Skywalker said.

"It's me, Jade. What's your situation?"

"We'll be clear to jump in under a minute. Did Nat and Arlen get clear?"

"Yes. They got their cargo too. Did Tanith make it out?"

"She's with us. We loaded as many children as we could before we left."

Allana could imagine the heartrending sight of so many young families torn forever. She could imagine how it would have affected Jade specifically.

"Thank you. Thank you both," she whispered. "Once we get clear I'm going to ride *Bright Union* back to Coruscant. There's going to have to be accounting for this. But please, if you could take those children to New Hapes—"

"Allana...." Jade began, but trailed off, hesitant.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry, I'm going to have to drop the kids off on an Alliance ship and go straight to Ossus."

"Is something wrong?"

Another long, hesitant pause. "Something important happened. Allana... I can't explain right now, but this could change everything."

Everything was already changed. After this battle nothing in the Hapes Cluster would be the same. After so many Alliance lives were lost, nothing would be the same for her on Coruscant either. Yet through their Force-connection, tenuous as it was, Allana felt that something even greater had happened, though she had no intimation what.

All she could do right now was sign off and go back to waiting and watching. When the carrier and the tattered remnants of the Alliance task force finally slipped free, Admiral Lekwash gave the order for *Bright Union* to withdraw. Allana watched from the bridge as the view panned away from Orelon VI's storm-bright, battle-ringed sphere, past the cool drifting Mists, and to the open patch of stars through which they'd jump.

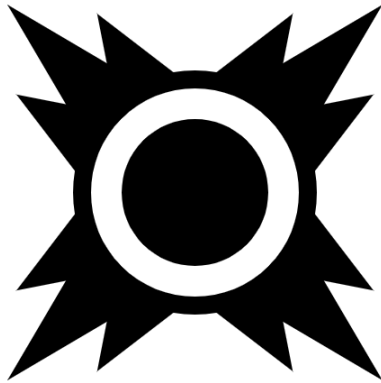
When the deck shuddered and they fell into the flashing light-tunnel of hyperspace, Allana felt exhausted relief wash over the bridge crew and even the admiral, but she felt none of it herself. They'd survived; that was the best she could say about today. On Coruscant she'd be held to account, and it would get ugly, but whatever lay ahead for Jade sounded like the greater reckoning.







# PART III



LAY DOWN THE SWORD



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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A solitary black ship decanted from hyperspace near Kovix-589 and began to fall inward toward the forgotten star. Seated alone in the cockpit, Darth Kroan began running sensor sweeps of the system, if it deserved to be called that. It had nothing in the way of planets, the closest being a few planetoids on wobbling oval orbits, and the only remarkable feature was a broad belt of asteroids rich in minerals useful for nothing except scrambling sensors.

As Kroan followed the coordinates he'd received during his short communication with Corrien Veers, he ran focused scans of the specified section of the belt. *Intruder's* sensor equipment was some of the best Kroan had ever seen but they retrieved nothing.

As *Intruder* slipped into the edge Kroan reduced speed and began looking with his eyes. Kovix-589 was distant and dim, but he thought he detected an unnaturally smooth gleam on one asteroid. Using *Intruder's* directional thrusters he edged himself close enough to see what he'd expected: a handful of turbolaser turrets grafted into the asteroid's surface. The belt was surely full of these, laying dormant to conserve power but able to tear apart an encroaching enemy fleet when called upon. They would be automated rather than live-controlled and the fact that they hadn't

fired on Kroan implied that either Veers had deactivated them for his approach or *Intruder* really was as invisible as advertised. Either way, he counted himself fortunate.

The Sith pushed further ahead toward the designated coordinates, sometimes slipping around drifting spacerock and other times slowing to investigate suspicious asteroids. Sure enough, he found several more bristling with automatic turrets. He could spot them with his eyes if he got close but they were stubbornly invisible to his sensors. Kroan had to give Veers credit; even on the verge of total defeat he'd built himself an impressive redoubt.

Kroan didn't need his computer to tell him he'd arrived at the right coordinates. Those defensive guns were very hard to spot but even in dim starlight *Nemesis* was impossible to hide. A long time ago, when Veers had been governor of the Prefsbelt Sector and Kroan still chair of Kuat Drive Yards, they'd conspired together to craft this ship as the ultimate in modern warfare. Its long and narrow hull stretched like a sword seventeen kilometers long, with a low recessed bridge and symmetric sloping hull. These elements had been visibly copied by Kuati engineers eager to sell to Davek Fel, and during its last engagement *Nemesis* had been battered mostly by its own children, new *Pellaeon*-class star destroyers and *Ardent*-class frigates. The scars of battle were painfully visible on the ship now. The last two hundred meters of its pointed nose had been snapped off. Great black craters still pocked the hull near the bridge and its once-smooth off-white hull was darkened to rough gray by countless shrapnel-scrapes.

It was a bitter sight but also a sweet one, because for all the ugly damage *Nemesis* was still something Kroan had designed and brought to fruition. It filled him with more pride than everything he'd done the past eight years combined.

There were just under a dozen smaller star destroyers drifting along with *Nemesis* in this pocket of clear space within the asteroid belt. Kroan marked four *Compellor*-class destroyers, two *Impellor*-class carriers, and five smaller *Predator* -class ships, plus a smattering of frigates and pickets. All of them bore visible battle

damage but even so it was a flotilla that could devastate a world if they caught it off-guard. With a force like this Kroan might even be able to demolish Darth Saydel's fleet and bomb Hapes into rubble; an unrealistic but nonetheless pleasant thought.

When he was close enough, Kroan turned on the comm system and sent word to Veers' personal frequency, the one he'd memorized for their clandestine communications ten years back and never forgotten. The message was simple: I am here.

The response came five minutes later, not as words but as a landing beacon cast to his ship from *Nemesis*. Kroan followed the assigned course to a small hangar located at the great vessel's aft, above the engines and beneath the bridge. Kroan remembered designing this ship and he remembered that this hangar was meant as a secure, private place to receive very important guests. Just where he was meant to be.

*Intruder* glided out of space's darkness and into the hangar's light. Kroan extended the landing gear and dropped the ship down on the edge of the flight deck. When he stepped out he was slightly disappointed to find that Veers hadn't come to greet him personally. Instead there was just a dozen stormtroopers: seven in white plasteel armor but five in the bronze-tinted armor molded from the cortosis ore Kroan had secretly provided all those years ago. It was a motely mix and he didn't know what to make of it.

The closest trooper, one in cortosis, said, "Please come this way, sir."

As a welcome it was disappointing. As a Sith Lord, as the man more responsible than any for this great ship's creation, Kroan knew he deserved better. That was something to bring up with Veers, not this soldier, so he simply nodded and allowed them to escort him through *Nemesis*' hallways. *Intruder* would be safe in the hangar; if Veers' people got too curious they'd only lose their lives to the ship's security devices.

He tried to track their movement inside the long, gray, empty corridors. He tried to map it to his memory of this ship's design. He knew they were moving up, probably toward Veers' executive cabin, but apparently his memory was faded, because he was taken by

surprise when the troopers stopped him in front of one innocuous door and bid him enter.

Kroan stepped inside. The door locked behind him, leaving him alone in this dimly-lit room. No, not alone: he spotted the back of a man's head shifting over the back of a chair. He was facing the broad viewport that looked out on drifting asteroids and a passing star destroyer.

"There you are," said Veers' remembered voice. "Have a seat. Please."

Kroan walked forward and circled around the chair. Rather than rising, Veers stayed slumped in his seat. He let his head fall back and his eyes swing up and he gave Kroan a dull-eyed looked-over.

"Well," Veers said, "I'm impressed you came back from the dead, but I have to say you've looked better. Please, have a seat. Help yourself."

He held out a hand and Kroan noticed the neighboring chair, just as soft, and the low table between them. A bottle of Sartainynian brandy sat there with two poured glasses. The one closer to Veers was already half-drunk.

It had been a long time since Kroan's tasted Bastion's finest. On Kuat he'd had access to the best in food and drink in the galaxy; accoutrements on Shedua Maad were far less generous. Wyyrllok had never stopped harping on the values of asceticism. Kroan dropped himself into the soft chair, poured himself the drink, and savored its pleasant, half-forgotten sting.

Veers was watching him with a wry smile. "My. What *happened* to you, Retor of Kuhvult? Or do you have another name?"

"Why would I have another?" Kroan asked sententiously.

"When you, ah, disappeared there were many rumors. The Jedi claimed you were one of those elusive Sith Lords they blame all their problems on. Your own people said you'd been murdered. I was always.... curious."

"The Jedi tried to kill me. Obviously they didn't."

"No, but I can see it was close."

Kroan nodded; he wasn't going to explain that most of the scars that darkened his face had been punishment from another, more powerful Sith Lord.

Veers took a sip of brandy and asked, very casually, "So are you a Sith or not?"

"My name is Darth Kroan."

Veers narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. Through the Force Kroan could glean little; he suspected the man had started drinking long before his guest arrived and it was fogging his thinking.

Fogged wasn't the same as dulled. Veers asked, "Why have you come here? Are you on the run from your own people?"

He tried to hide surprise. "Why would I be on the run?"

Veers sipped a little more. "Why else would you come to Kovix-589? This place is a burial ground for lost hopes."

"It's the best-armed burial ground I've ever seen."

"You saw the turrets on the way in? Good. Did you spot the mines? No. We stuck those *inside* the asteroids. Absolutely impossible to spot until..." He snapped two fingers.

"This place seems impregnable."

"Well, we don't have many *other* places left to defend. If we're going to secure what we have, we might as well do it right. Grave and I agreed on that much."

"You've still been staging attacks. Bastion. Muunilist. You're putting fear into them."

"Of course. Welcome to Kovix-589.... We import lost hopes and export raw terror." He chuckled, though it wasn't that funny. More bitterly he added, "We do what we can."

"You still have a mighty collection of ships here. You could easily take a major planet, and-"

"Then what?" Veers arched a pale brow. His hair had gotten a lot whiter; Kroan hadn't noticed previously for the dim light. "This is *all* we have. We've no industrial output whatsoever. We just barely kept our contract with our outside suppliers. And the ships you saw, those fine ships, are all damaged and operating at half crew capacity."

"So you've surrendered."

Veers glared. "We've adjusted our fighting strategy in consideration of limited resources and optimized our methods to deal the most efficient damage." It sounded like he was quoting someone.

"I see," Kroan said evenly.

"But you know, Darth, I am glad you've come. Hopeless as our fight is." He smiled wryly. "I've never figured out exactly what a Sith Lord *does*, but I'm sure you've got talents above and beyond what mere mortals can offer."

"You'd be correct."

"Excellent. Now tell me—"

The buzzer from his door interrupted him. It rang three times before Veers scowled and called loudly past his shoulder, "Enter!"

A man in an admiral's uniform stepped into the darkened room. Kroan had never met him in person but he recognized Leonal Grave when he saw him. The admiral stalked over to Veers' seat, hands balled into fists at his side, then stopped when he realized the man had company. His eyes, tightened in apparent anger, grew wider as he took in the scarring on Kroan's face.

The admiral forced his attention back on Veers. "We were going to meet to discuss the Jaemus operation. You're forty minutes late. I tried hailing you but your comm was off."

"It wasn't off, I was ignoring you," Veers said casually and sipped a little more brandy. "I had a guest coming, you see. I had to be a good host."

Grave's eyes reluctantly slid back to Kroan. "A guest from where?"

"Outside." Veers waved a hand. "I invited him. You should show some respect. This man was a great benefactor to the Restorationist movement. This mighty warship wouldn't exist if it weren't for him."

"Is that so?" Graves didn't bother to hide his skepticism.

"Oh, stop being rude." Veers rolled his eyes and told Kroan, "Don't be offended. He's always impatient like this. Admiral Grave, please meet Retor of Kuhvult."

The admiral stared. "Retor... of Kuhvult?"



"Is there another?" asked Veers.

"It is a pleasure," Kroan said dryly.

Grave stared at the Sith Lord's scarred face until he found something he recognized. Then, to his credit, he snapped to attention and dropped the attitude with impressive speed. "It is an honor to meet you. Forgive my skepticism. I understood you've been dead for years."

"You're not far from wrong," said Kroan. "But that's in the past."

Despite the shabby state these Restorationists were in, he was still aboard the galaxy's mightiest warship, the one he'd designed himself in his prime. He felt more alive than he had in years because Veers was right: as a Sith Lord he could do much to help these people. He was without the resources of the One Sith but without the shackles placed by Darth Krayt's distant dreams. He'd never imagined defeat would be so liberating.

"It sounds as though you're planning another terrorist attack on Jaemus," Kroan said as he got to his feet.

"We're planning an offensive that makes optimal use of our limited resources," Grave said, prickly. Trust an old-style Imperial to couch barbarism in formalities, unless he was in his cups.

"I'd love to hear what you have in mind, Admiral." Kroan finished the rest of his brandy in two big swallows. As warm filled his stomach he set the glass on the table and fixed Grave's stunned face with a smile. "Shall we get going?"

When Vitor crawled inside Soergg's sensor-shielded cargo crate and allowed the Hutt's minions to place him aboard the Restorationist shuttle, he'd been consigning himself to a fate unknown. Even if he went undiscovered when the ship reached its destination there was no guarantee he'd be where he needed to be. Despite that, a steady confidence had fallen on him since the fight atop Soergg's palace. The anxiety that had kept his sleepless and trembling every night seemed to have dissolved like the memory of a bad dream. It wasn't that he'd forgotten his last vision of the future. Here at least, far from Marin and hopefully far from the Sith, he felt far from death

too. That he had a chance to finally end this grueling war made it the best kind of reprieve.

Quiet confidence sustained him all through the trip. He knew the flight from Hutt Space to the Empire could take an average ship four to six days and packed rations accordingly, though stuck in the crate there was nothing he could do to get the blood stirring in his legs. He dropped himself into a state of mild Force hibernation, slowing his pulse and breathing, cooling his metabolism so he required less food. The voyage passed like a lucid dream, and thankfully the Force sent no prophetic ones during that time.

He knew when the shuttle arrived by the scrape of landing gear touching down and the fading-out of the engines' drone. This was where things got difficult and he ran into dangerous unknowns. He had a blaster, two lightsabers, and most importantly the Force. He could feel the ship's sole and weary pilot disembarking and beyond him there was the fainter presence of a few more people, probably service crew. Until he got out of the crate it was impossible to tell if they'd landed on a planet or a ship. It was also impossible to know if anyone else was going to come aboard.

Vitor decided not to risk it. He felt the pilot step out of the ship and used that opportunity to trigger the release built into the crate's interior. He spilled out into a half-empty cargo hold that looked exactly as he'd found it. Vitor kept alert for new arrivals as he stretched blood back into sluggish limbs, checked his equipment, and made sure both lightsabers- his own and Mohrgan's- were firmly affixed to his belt.

The tricky part was getting out. He sensed no one aboard the ship but the landing ramp had been retracted, which could make getting out unnoticed tricky. He made his way to the cockpit and looked through the viewport. This was the inside of a spaceship alright; he could see black space through the hangar mouth. The hangar itself had high gray walls and looked decidedly Imperial, though he had no way of knowing what kind of ship or space station he was aboard. Very carefully, he crept up to the forward edge of the cockpit and spotted a pair of white-armored stormtroopers standing in the middle of the hangar. They were

facing away from the ship and their stances looked lazy, but they were still guards.

If Vitor had come all this way to get captured sneaking out of the shuttle, he'd never forgive himself. He decided to wait and check the ship's computer. He was able to access navigation logs without running into security walls and found a record of the path the ship had taken. Kor Vosadii was clearly marked, as were the transition points between hyperspace jumps. Their final location, according to this, was near a star called Kovix-589. He vaguely recalled the existence of a Kovix star cluster at the very edge of Imperial space and the rim of the galaxy itself. He was pretty sure it didn't have a single habitable planet and was neglected by pretty much anyone. If it also had around six hundred possible stars to hide around, it was no wonder the Restorationists had made a nest here.

It also seemed like an ideal place for *the* big nest, the one his father had been hunting for almost four years. Vitor allowed himself to hope.

Hope was a distraction. He was nearly caught off-guard when someone lowered the ship's ramp from the outside. A tremor of intent felt in the Force jarred him from considered possibilities and gave just enough warning for him to find a hiding place inside the refresher unit. He waited facing the door, back against the sink, one hand on his lightsaber. He waited as he heard footsteps approach and then pass by, and he heard a voice saying. "This won't take long. With you two helping we can get this up to the admiral in no time."

Vitor knew his wasn't the only crate Soergg had placed aboard the shuttle. There had been two others, apparently some sort of gift for his Restorationist clients. If they were taking this good to an admiral it meant was on an important ship, maybe *the* important ship. But first he needed to get out of the refresher.

He waited until they were gone and carefully unlocked the door. He crept down the hall in the opposite direction they'd gone down and made his way to the exit. He reached out with the Force, felt nobody down there, and very carefully stalked down the landing ramp. He scanned the high-roofed hangar until he spotted a holocamera, then sent a flash of static through its matrix with the

Force. It was a trick that would last less than thirty seconds, but that was enough for him to scamper across the empty flight deck and into the adjoining hallway.

It was hard to sneak around a ship when you didn't even know which ship you were on or how to get around. Vitor had spent a lot of time on Imperial warships and he could make some educated guesses. The shuttle had set down in a small hangar but not one surrounded by high-level security, which meant it was probably a supplemental facility located near the main hangar. If he was near the main hangar, it meant he was also near the supply and storage sections of the ship.

What he really needed was a set of unused stormie armor to slip into. He made his way through the hall slowly, flashing out a few security cameras and using the Force to help evade the crew. There were fewer of them than expected. The entire ship seemed emptied, almost eerily so, especially for an important one with an admiral aboard.

When he found an equipment locker, he used his lightsaber for the first time since the fight at Soergg's palace. The lock wouldn't give but a quick, precise swipe with the tip of his blade did the job. The door opened wide and he found himself staring at a carefully folded set of cortosis armor. Vitor had never been one for displays of cosmic irony but he was glad for this one. He dressed quickly and left his old clothes in the locker when he stepped back into the halls. The outfit's utility pouch just barely had room to squeeze both lightsabers inside, but so long as no one looked too closely it would do.

The stormtrooper armor was only partial camouflage. The soldiers who got cortosis gear were supposedly the best of the best, and if people saw him wandering the ship like he was lost it would raise suspicion.

Masquerading as an elite got him advantages, as he discovered when he found a public-use information terminal not far from the lockers. He'd found an identicard left in the armor's utility pouch and swiped it to access the terminal. Apparently he's taken the gear of a careless corporal with pretty good security clearance.

The public terminal alone told Vitor enough to make him weak at the knees. The first thing he learned was that he was aboard the Restorationist flagship *Nemesis*. The second thing he learned was that almost a dozen other star destroyers were gathered at desolate Kovix-598. He could also call up a detailed map of the super star destroyer's entrails and plot a course from his spot near the hangar all the way to the bridge.

But the bridge could wait. The simple fact was that he'd finally found it: the big nest. His father had to be informed, and to do that he'd have to compose and message and send it to Bastion from a long-range transmitter aboard this ship.

Vitor used the public terminal to locate the nearest communications station. There was a comm node located just forward from the main hangar and he hurried there as quickly as he could without drawing attention. As he walked down the hall, drawing only the briefest glances from passing Restorationists, he tried to run up a mental list of everything his father would need to know. Not just the location and the ships involved but the armaments, the personnel, the system's defenses. He didn't know how much of that he could get with a corporal's ID, even a corporal from an elite unit. He also didn't know how many crew members he'd have to deal with at the comm center. Someone would notice when he sent a message to Bastion but he was still hoping he could get in and out without starting a fight. The longer he could last undercover the better.

When he stepped through the door he found a circular chamber with five seats and five consoles but only three crew members present. The nearest one swiveled in his chair and looked surprised to see a stormtrooper.

"Can we help you?" the woman asked.

"I'll need to access your long-range transmitter." He flashed his corporal's ID and added persuasion through the Force. "My platoon has an away team on Ord Thoden. I need to pass them a message."

"Is your team's transmitter not working?" asked a second, younger crewman.

It figured the best units would have their own gear. "No. It broke down yesterday."

"Everything's falling apart nowadays," grumbled the female officer. "Do you want us to take a look at it?"

"We already put in a repair request. I just need to use your comm so I can get back to what I'm *supposed* to be doing." Vitor added finality in his tone and the Force. The longer they insisted on chatting the more likely he was to slip up.

The woman shrugged and gestured him to one of the open stations. It was a standard Imperial console that Vitor had worked before. His corporal's ID seemed to get him access to the long-range transmitter but before he patched a message for his father, he pulled up readings from the outside sensors.

He got a better view of their surroundings and he didn't like them. The star destroyers would make for a rough fight; worse was the broad asteroid belt in which these ships were hidden. It would be hard for his father to get a fleet in here just for the navigation hazard, and from what Vitor was reading, an elaborate set of turbolaser emplacements and proton mines had been installed in the asteroids themselves. They sounded like they could make a difficult attack downright impossible.

The turbolasers in the rocks would be controlled by a remote signal rather than manned. In all likelihood that signal came from *Nemesis*, but if Vitor was going to do anything about it, it wouldn't be from a backup communications relay. For now he did what he could. He summarized all the information he'd gathered in a long typed-up message, manually encrypted it using a code known only by his father and the Imperial Knights, then sent it to Bastion.

The encryption must have camouflaged the transmission's destination, because none of the three comm officers pulled a blaster on him. Somebody higher up would notice where that message went, and then they'd look for the corporal whose ID he'd stolen, and then they'd look for the man who was inside his stolen armor.

Vitor didn't know how much time he had before they started scouring the ship for an intruder, but they hadn't begun yet. That

was something. He closed his session, rose from the terminal, gave the comm crew the gruff thanks they'd expect from a stormie, and hurried out of the room. His time left was limited, and he had to make the most of it.

There was nothing personal about the message, not even a short sign-off, but Davek knew it had come from his son. Thanks to a message from Roan, sent from Arlen's ship of all places, he'd learned the outcome of the mission to Hutt Space and the incredible risk Vitor was taking. If he'd been there he'd have stepped in to stop it but letting his sons be Imperial Knights meant letting range across the galaxy, which meant giving them authorization to take drastic risks. Necessity piled on necessity and he hated it. It left him feeling, above all else, *tired*. This war for control of the Empire's soul had dragged on and on, even after the Restorationists had lost all hope of winning, and every battle might cost him more people he loved.

Vitor had survived his journey. He was alive, and he'd found the big nest. Given the encrypted frequency the message had been received on, there was no other possible author. As soon as the message came through, Davek had ordered Admiral Jaeger to dispatch a scout ship to the star Kovix-289 and gathered as many senior officers as he could to his flagship, the *Jagged Fel*.

To combat the Restorationists, the Empire's war machine had been built up for a years-long slog. Modern efficient warships like the *Pellaeon*-class star destroyer had been introduced but Davek had resisted temptation to build another behemoth like *Nemesis*. His father had taught him that a competent military is based around many mobile assets wisely used, rather than a giant weapon made to hammer one enemy at a time. Aside from being a waste of resources, Jagged had insisted that a giant super star destroyer sent the worst kind of message, harkening as it did to the dark days of Palpatine's punishing oppression. For all those reasons Davek had prioritized output of smaller ships, but as Emperor he still needed one that could draw respect. *Jagged Fel*, like *Nemesis*, was one-of-a-kind, and had initially been constructed as a prototype for the

smaller *Pellaeon*-class ships. *Jagged Fel* was longer than them by a third but only twenty percent more massive. Its stretched-long and symmetric hull had been constructed of metal so pale it looked almost white, especially in contrast to the massive black Imperial roundels painted on either flank.

Davek kept *Jagged Fel* orbiting Bastion whenever possible, both to show authority and to keep his citizens feeling safe. The destruction of Skyhook One made its presence all the more imperative, and it was to that ship that shuttles converged from Yaga Minor, Bilbringi, and a half-dozen other Imperial military bases. A major operation was in the offing and he didn't want to chance a leaked transmission giving the Restorationists warning.

When his scout ship reported in, Devlin Jaeger joined the other senior officers in *Jagged Fel*'s meeting room. The admiral got to the point quickly. "Our scout ship spent two full hours exploring the area around Kovix-598. It used every type of sensor sweep its equipment allowed. After those two hours it couldn't find a single trace of gas, metal fragment, or heat signature that would indicate a Restorationist fleet hiding in that asteroid belt."

A few officers at the table seemed to wilt in disappointment, but Jaeger went on, "Our scout eventually concluded some mineral property in the asteroids must be jamming sensors. Before departing, our ship brought its telescoping visual suite online and began to scour the belt. This is what it saw."

At Jaeger's signal, a two-dimensional image projected over the wall. Davek and the others watched a series of primitive but high-definition photographs depicted endless drifts of airless space rock. Yet amidst all that shapeless tone some flecks stood out. A few shots depicted distant objects with the pronounced wedge shape of star destroyers. The final one showed a pale object shaped like a sword, flanked on either side by smaller triangles. *Nemesis*, beyond a doubt.

"So there is it," Admiral Hallis said gravely.

"At last," muttered Intel Director Vennefara. "Your agent is to be commended, Your Majesty."



"Indeed," Davek said. He hadn't told them the agent's identity and didn't plan to. They'd surely all guess it was an Imperial Knight but the only one who knew it was Vitor himself was Marasiah. She was standing silent guard behind his chair while dressed in an Imperial Knight's ceremonial red armor and cape.

"The crew on *Nemesis* will figure out a message was sent here, if they haven't already," said Jaeger. "That means there's no time to waste."

"What is the status of the Fourth Fleet, admiral?" asked Davek.

"I ordered battle stations before I sent the scout, Your Majesty. They are ready to launch."

"Good. Leave a skeleton force at Bilbringi, then take every you can spare and jump to Kovix-598. Your first goal is to interdict. Make sure no vessels enter or leave that system without your permission."

"Understood."

"I will personally command the First Fleet." Davek looked around the table and no one raised objections. They knew their emperor commanded from the front lines because risk was part of duty; they were lucky not to know how far that maxim went.

"I want the Second and Third fleets to spread wide, just in case their ships outside Kovix get desperate and try to attack more civilians. I've also sent a request to the Chiss and they've assured us they'll be there too."

"That sounds like more than enough to lay siege to the system and destroy *Nemesis*," said Vennefara. "Where's the difficulty?"

"According to our agent, that asteroid belt is the best defensive barrier Veers could hope for. Aside from the natural obstacles, an undetermined number of mines have been equipped with automated turbolaser cannons. Others have been fixed with proton mines. All of these will be undetectable to our sensors."

It was a battle that could grind on forever, and Davek watched the grim realization show on face after face. He said, "We need to be prepared to starve them if we have to, but I think they'll fight before then. Admiral Jaeger, you're dismissed. You're hereby ordered to move the Fourth Fleet to Kovix-598 as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Jaeger snapped a fast salute and hurried from the chamber.

Davek turned a grim look on the others. "You know what needs to be done. I will work with the Imperial Knights to see what they can do to help us with the asteroid belt. Until then, you have your orders. Get to them. The First Fleet will depart as soon as the crew of the *Jagged Fel* is combat-ready. I estimate no more than five hours."

The officers stood and moved quickly for the door. Vennefara remained near the table, and Davek knew the Elomin would have an array of questions for him.

"Please wait outside for the moment, Director," Davek told him.

Vennefara nodded and stepped away. He was the last one to go, and when the door closed behind him it was just Davek and Marasiah alone in the briefing room.

"We have to move quickly," she said at once. "It's our only hope of recovering Vitor."

"Are your TIE Sabers ready?"

"We have twelve waiting in the hangar."

"And Knights to fly them?"

"Of course. I can get a dozen more but it will take a few hours."

"Take what you have and go now. I'll let Devlin know to expect your help. Just don't be reckless. They'll see your approach."

"I know." One look in her eyes told him she was willing to risk everything to get Vitor out alive.

He put his hands on her armor-plated shoulders. "*Please...* don't be reckless."

"Have you told Roan?" she asked.

"No. There hasn't been time."

"He'll want to come."

Of course he would. Vitor would be the foremost reason but even without him, Roan would crave to help. This war had started when he was just nine years old and had defined his life. Davek knew his younger son had in many ways grown up in the older one's shadow, and that he yearned to serve the Empire and find heroism in his own way.

It was for all those reasons he couldn't come.

"I'll tell him to stay with Mohrgan and Sinde on Ossus," Davek said. "They'll be safe there."

"He's going to hate it."

"I know. But I can't risk losing them both, not at the end."

He'd risked them both together as recently as Ansion, but they both knew this was different. Kovix-598 was the biggest deadliest rat's nest of all. Many Imperial Knights and ordinary soldiers would die to exterminate it. Vitor was trapped aboard the enemy flagship and might already be a prisoner, perhaps inaccessible even to the Empire's best knights.

It was not just possible but likely that neither Davek nor Marasiah would see their eldest son again. They both knew it; they could see it in each other's eyes. Their relationship had been built on honesty and hard truths since they'd first met on *Voidwalker* a quarter-century ago, but this one was too much. Neither of them could say it.

She reached up to touch his face and brush his beard. "I'll get Vitor back," she said, like she was willing herself to believe.

"Bring yourself back too."

She reared up on her toes, kissed him once, then stepped out of the room. Vennefara waited a minute before coming through the doors. The intel director was a perceptive being, and he knew Davek would need a few moments to compose himself. Emperor or not, he was only human.

Meetings called on short notice never meant anything good. Korosh Vull had figured that one out decades ago, when he'd been a mere bomber pilot instead of whatever you'd call his job aboard *Nemesis*. General, coordinator, courier, diplomat; any of those or neither at any moment. Well, they always said small organizations needed workers with wide skill sets.

When he stepped into the conference room he saw all the men he'd been expecting: Grave, Sojuz, Fenrec. Even Veers had arrived early, though his sobriety was doubtful. Yet when Vull's eyes swept across the table they were immediately drawn to the one face he

didn't know. The skin across that hairless head was crinkled and rough, darkened by scars all over. The body beneath was buried in formless black robes. What stood out most were his eyes. Their irises seemed tinted golden-yellow like nothing Vull had ever seen before.

"General Vull," Veers said, "There's no need to stare. Surely you've heard of Retor of Kuhvult."

Vull stared even more. They all knew the Kuati chairman had been one of Veers' major backers when this all began. They also knew he was dead, apparently killed by Jedi on Fel's behalf. How he'd survived- barely, by the look of him- was one begging question. The more immediate one was how he'd gotten to their secret stronghold at all. Vull looked around the table and saw the same bafflement on everyone's faces.

"Sit down, General," Grave said. "Something critical has happened."

Vull sat down. Everyone kept looking at Retor, but it was Captain Fenrec who said, "Approximately three hours ago, a signal was transmitted from *Nemesis* to Bastion. We believe Fel is now aware of our position."

That elicited a round of gasps and mutters from everyone but Grave, Veers, and Retor. The old captain continued, "We believe there is an intruder aboard who stole the armor and identification card from one of our stormtroopers. Using that guise he sent the transmission from a secondary comm station. We're working to track him now."

"We have to assume Fel's minions are on their way," said Grave. "And we have to be ready for them."

Everyone's eyes were drawn, awkwardly and ineluctably, to the newcomer. No one dared suggest anything. No one dared speak at all.

Retor did it for them. "I have been with your leader since my arrival. I promise, there was absolutely no one else aboard my ship."

"Trust him," said Veers. "He would know."

Vull had absolutely no idea what that meant. Then realization hit him. The only other ship to arrive in-system within the past twenty-four hours was his own.

Fenrec started saying something else, but it barely registered. Vull's jaw slipped loose; the world seemed to swim around him. When he'd finally been allowed to leave Kor Vosadii, the slug Soergg had offered him several crates full of spoils as a reward for spotting the thieves who'd been stealing his droid. Soergg had offered almost nothing in the way of explanation, saying only that recent events had been staged by a business competitor, presumably the Hutt he'd rolled out his best slimy carpet to welcome. Best Vull could read him, Soergg had seemed embarrassed and ashamed. Nothing in the fiasco had given any indication that it might fall back on the Restorationists in any way.

Yet something had happened. Vull knew that with icy certainty in his gut. Maybe it was a stowaway; maybe Soergg had betrayed them. He realized, with another sick stab, that none of that mattered. Nothing did except the doom he'd brought upon them all.

Grave was talking. Vull forced himself to listen. The admiral said, "We don't have time to begin moving *Nemesis* or the other destroyers through the asteroid belt. Therefore, we will treat this as the start of a terminal siege."

"All those guns and mines in the belt should hold them for a while," Veers said, boyishly eager, like he *wanted* to die here. "When they finally get through, they'll be so battered they won't offer much of a fight."

"We have supplies to withstand a siege of up to six months," Grave said sternly. "It may come to that."

"Naturally," said Fenrec, "We should prepare to defend ourselves actively at the start. We'll start mustering fighter groups to slow the enemy as they try to get through the belt."

"I'll do it." The words jumped out of Vull's throat. All eyes went to him but he only looked at Grave. The admiral saw his shock, his dread, his guilt, and understood them all. Maybe nobody else yet knew whose fault this was, but the admiral did.

"I was a fighter pilot for many years," Vull croaked. "Let me be one again. To defend the Empire."

Grave's eyes were unreadable, but in an amazingly steady voice he said, "Thank you for the offer, General Vull. Your bravery is a model to us all. I'll make sure you have a place on the front lines."

A place to die, no doubt. After what he'd done, what he'd let happen beneath his nose, death in battle was a better fate than he deserved. It was coming for them all anyway, even if it might be a six-month grind for some.

Sober knowledge settled in everyone's eyes; even Veers' seemed to lose their vicious gleam. The only exception was the man in black. Retor of Kuhvult looked barely affected by it all. It might have been a trick of the scarring, but his lips looked twisted in something like a bemused smile.

All them gathered here were facing death, or imprisonment if they were unlucky. All of them except this Retor, who'd appeared as though from nothing and could probably disappear just as easily. Their coming doom didn't scare Retor at all, and that terrified Vull more than anything.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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The success of the mission to Kor Vosadii left Marin feeling warm with triumph. By the time her X-wing arrived over Da Soocha she'd succeeded in wrestling the blaster away from the unctuous Squib riding in her lap and refused to deliver the stolen droid until she got confirmation that Vitor was alive and unharmed. She got that confirmation, quicker than expected, through a short conversation with her cousin. Vitor had explained his new mission and firmly rebuffed her attempt to talk him out of it. All Marin could do was wish the Force be with him.

She was worried about Vitor but she knew it was outside her control. Once she set down on the moon Napdu she released both her passenger and her cargo to Azzim the Hutt. A holo-transmitter unit was provided for her to speak with Vedo, still gloating on Kor Vosadii, and then with her father, who'd summarized the frenzied events in the Hapes Cluster. Marin didn't understand everything from his description but the people she cared about had gotten out of there alive, so she counted that as a win too.

Her father said he was heading to Ossus and suggested Marin join. She agreed, but Azzim insisted on treating her to a reward for her labors. Since Volgma and Chance Calrissian were still on Napdu, the three of them shared a feast of mostly-edible delicacies

and, once her stomach settled, she finally accepted the offer of a private session in one of Azzim's sulfur baths.

Marin Fel was not used to being pampered, but she decided she could get used to it. And Azzim was right; she *did* deserve a little extra reward after crawling through the sewers and slimy swamps of Kor Vosadii. More, this whole crazy plan to track arms shipments from Arquilla back to the source had been hers more than anyone's. Striking deals with multiple criminal overlords might not be ideal Jedi behavior but it had worked out for the greater good and might even bring the down last of the Restorationist fanatics, ending an eight-year war that had split her family apart.

So Marin enjoyed her sulfur bath with absolutely no regrets, and when she was done she dressed and went back to her X-wing to prep for flight tomorrow. That was when she noticed that someone had tried to hail her an hour earlier. They'd left no message but she could see it had come from her uncle Mekr's ship, the *Bottom Line*.

So she returned the call, and it all came crashing down.

She listened to Mekr's gruff voice explain everything: the act, the time and place, the victims, the killer. She listened to it all without saying a word, and when he was done the signal buzzed faintly for almost a minute before she asked, "Where is he now?"

"We're looking into that," said Mekr.

"And you *sure* it's him?"

"Multiple witnesses confirm it. He said he was Gevern Auch's brother. There's only one of those left."

"What do you know about him?"

"Not much. He was the little brother. Never that close to Gevern from what I heard and didn't try to cling to his shadow like Jerkal. Heard he laid low after they died and took ti merc work with some *aruetisse* company."

She wanted to ask what he thought he'd gain by avenging Gevern's death now, after all this time, but only the Jedi part of her was confounded. The Mando part knew the shame every Auch's had fallen into after their *Mand'alor* had died mysteriously and unavenged. And she knew that while Jedi looked down on revenge as clear passage to the Dark Side, Mandalorians saw it as the most



pure kind of justice. It didn't get much simpler than an eye for an eye, a life for a life.

"Why isn't my *buir* telling me this?" Marin asked.

"She's working on Kaynar's location now. We've already got a lead."

Marin knew that wouldn't be the only reason. Her mother knew the Jedi codes, knew what Marin was supposed to be and how she was supposed to deal with a situation like this.

For so long she had tried to be a different kind of Jedi, one who could balance the conflicting values from either half of her family. She'd tried and she'd even thought she'd succeeded but the choice facing her now was stark. Mekk might not have understood the fullness of it, but he knew the choice, and he wouldn't have called her if he wasn't expecting an answer.

The Jedi said revenge was a quick path to the dark, and they were probably correct, but right now all Marin could think about was Ninet. When she had been separated from Vitor it had felt like she'd lost not a cousin but her brother. That had left a hole in her heart that needing filling and Ninet, her cousin from the so-different Mando side, had come closest to stopping the gap. But thinking of Ninet only filled her with the aching for revenge. There was a better reason to help the Skiratas find Kaynar Auchs. It would be justice too; the amendment of a grave mistake. The killing of Gevern Auchs had been her doing and hers alone, and she'd skirted the consequences of that action for so long she'd come to believe there were no costs at all.

Ninet and Dorn had been forced to pay them in her stead. She could never make amends for what she'd done to them but standing aside, refusing to help her remaining family track their killer in a stand of Jedi stoicism, would be a conscious betrayal, compounding the harm she'd already done without intending. And that was already far too much.

"I'll leave right away," she told Mekk. "Are you still on Mandalore?"

"That's right."

"Comm me if anything changes. I'll meet you wherever you go."

"Understood. See you soon, *Mar'ika*."

She couldn't recall her gruff scarred uncle ever using that term of affection before. It jarred her, added to the trembling that ran through her body as she clambered out of her cockpit and down to the landing pad. She stepped away from the ship and tried to calm herself and figure out what had to be done. Shadows had swallowed this side of Napdu; stars spread out overhead, their light dulled by the ocean-blue marble of Da Soocha glowing bright in the east. She stared up at that cool cerulean light and drew in deep breaths of the invisible sulfur-reek rising from clear-water lakes.

She could go at any minute; everything she had was either in the ship or on her person. She'd leave soon, but she had to figure out what to tell her father first. He was expecting her on Ossus and he'd need an explanation. She couldn't tell him about Ninet and Dorn. She didn't think she could handle speaking to him directly, not now. And if she dropped him a short text-only message he'd comm her back with questions.

There was one more option; the circuitous, cowardly one. Marin hurried inside the spa complex until she found Vedo's shuffling silver protocol droid, who directed her to Chance Calrissian. She found Chance sitting on a plush sofa, enjoying his evening drink and talking with Volgma and Azzim as the two Hutts lounged on repulsor-sleds.

She hung in the doorway, stared right at him, and asked, "Can I talk to you, Chance?"

He put down his glass, excused himself with a smile, and followed her into the hall. He'd seen a lot just in her eyes. That smile turned to frown the second they were alone.

"What's going on, Marin?"

"Something's come up on Mandalore. I need to go right away." She hugged herself tight. "Tell my dad for me."

"Wait, what? Why can't you tell him yourself?"

"There's no time."

"What, you can't comm him when you're on the way? What's going on?"

She looked down at her boots. For some stupid reason she'd thought this would be easy. Chance was her father's best friend; he looked on her like a niece. "Just tell him I'll be a couple days late to Ossus. But I'll be there."

"Marin..."

"Just do it. Please."

Awkward silence stretched between them until he said, "Okay. Fine. Be careful, Marin."

"Don't worry about me," she said. She looked up, caught a glimpse of his doubting eyes, then hurried away, down the clean curving halls, into the cool starry night where her ship was ready to take her away.

There was at least two dozen ways for five fully-equipped Mandalorians to storm a one-storey building. Because they'd spent the past three hours staking out Shalk Jeban's small home on the outskirts of Keldabe they knew all they faced inside was one seventy-year-old man, so they chose the most direct and simple method.

They waited until night fell and only a little dim lamp-glow was visible through the front window. Mekar and his son Jind went straight for the front door as his nephews circled round the back in case of an escape. As Jind slipped close to the door and planted twin directional charges at its seam Mekar hovered right over his shoulder, Tamar a little further back with one eye on the light in the window. She had one hand on her holstered blaster and as Jind and Mekar stepped back she pulled the weapon and gripped it firmly in two hands.

"Ready to go," Jind's voice whispered in her helmet's earpiece. "Three. Two. One. Go."

The charges burst: a flash of light, a little smoke, and less noise than a discharging blaster. It wasn't enough to break down Shalk Jeban's front door, but it succeeded in popping its seam a few centimeters back from the frame. Jind and Mekar rushed in as one, grabbed the door, and used their combined strength to slide it further open.

Jind went through first, then Mekk. Tamar was right behind him. She counted seven seconds between detonation and entrance, and a quick Mando could grab his gun and find cover in that time.

Not Shalk Jeban. Tamar hadn't seen him in decades and the years hadn't been kind. His hair had gone all white and face and body both looked bloated as he sat in his soft chair, looking up at them stupidly as the holo-drama he'd been watching continued to play.

Mekk bellowed at him through his fierce Mythosaur-stamped helmet. "Hands up, *shabuir*! Hands up!"

Jeban raised them slowly and didn't try to rise from his chair. He looked over their armored bodies as they stood in the dark before him and it was only when he noticed Tamar that he realized what was going on.

"You can still walk out of this alive, old man," she snarled. "Where's Kaynar Auchs?"

"How the *shab* would I know that?"

"We're not as *di'kutla* as you," said Mekk. "We know who Dorn and Ninet were meeting before they got killed. We talked to Vasur. He told us *you* set up the meeting!"

"Word was you had stolen merch to unload. I was just trying to do him a favor."

"And *us* a favor?" She jabbed the tip of her blaster at his face. "Don't play us."

"You expect me to know where Kaynar is now? I don't."

Even with the anger that had been smoldering inside her since Dorn and Ninet's death, Tamar could use the Force to get a sense of Jeban. She felt the old Mando's panic but also something else; obfuscation if not lies.

"You know more," she hissed. "And you're going to tell us."

"Or else what, *dar'manda jeti*?"

He tried to sound tough, but he was terrified. She decided to give him more reason to fear.

It wasn't hard to summon a little more of those skills she'd used in Jedi school. They'd tried to teach her to use all that power from a place of inner peace, but that wasn't an option today. Fine by her; all

she needed was to reach out with an invisible hand and *will* that hand to close around Jeban's throat, squeezing the breath from his lungs.

His face started going red and thick wrinkled hands went for his neck, clawing for a noose that wasn't there. It was so damn tempting just to keep squeezing until his trachea snapped but reason and the little bit of Arlen inside her stayed that invisible hand.

When she let go Jeban gasped for breath. "You *jeti* trash, come in here and threaten *me*? You killed your *Mand'alor*! You're the traitor! I was getting *justice* done."

Mekr hit him hard, rifle-butt to forehead. Jeban keeled forward and for a second Tamar was afraid her cousin had killed him, but then the old man let out a low moan. Mekr grabbed him by the shirt, pulled him back upright, and waved the blaster's business-end in his face.

"Talk now you *chakaar* or you're going to have a crater instead of a face."

Blood was spilling from an already-swelled bruise above Jeban's left eye. The blow seemed to have taken the fight out of him. He groaned, "I don't *shabla* know where he is."

"You can guess," Tamar stated.

"I knew his family had a place... Gevern used it sometimes. Not on Mandalore. It was... Um..."

"Think really hard." Mekr held the blaster-tip right above his forehead wound.

"Loracan! I'm pretty sure he's on Loracan!"

"Why Loracan?"

"Geven had a hiding-hole there. Some place on the southern continent. Jerkal used it too."

Tamar knew the planet but hadn't been there. Most Mandos hadn't, even though it was on the edge of their space. The colony world was all salty oceans and dry continents. It didn't offer much but it made for a good hiding place. When she probed Jeban in the Force all she got was honest terror. He'd told what he knew. She hoped it would be enough.

"Thanks for your cooperation," Tamar told him. "Sorry about the door."

"*Shab, dar'manda jeti*," the old man sneered. "I wish he'd killed you instead."

Mekr and Jind tensed and she knew neither of them would blame her for blasting his face off right there. And a part of her wanted to, less for the insult and more because she still needed outlet for her grief-fueled anger. This time it was the Arlen part of her alone that made her lower her blaster and stuff it in its holster.

She left without a word. Her cousin gave Jeban a parting snipe, then followed her outside. As Jind called his cousins around from the back, Mekr trotted alongside her and said, "We'll take the *Bottom Line* to Loracan. Let's get back to Kyrimorut and load up."

"Agreed."

Tamar didn't have more to say, but once they were a block clear of Jeban's house, Mekr added, "Your daughter's on the way."

"What?" She stopped and stared at his white-stamped helmet.

"Well, you didn't tell her. Somebody had to."

"I was *going* to."

"When? After it was all said and done and she couldn't come and help?"

Tamar didn't know. She hadn't planned anything. She'd just been putting off the call out of a desperate delusion that if she delayed it might spare Marin the worst hurt. She and her daughter were the only ones left who knew Gevern Auch's real killer. They alone knew who Ninet and Dorn had died for. That would wound Marin for the rest of her life, but Tamar at least wanted to spare her daughter the pain of having to choose between her duties as a Jedi and her desire to do right by her Mando family.

Maybe it wasn't her right to shield Marin like that. She didn't know and didn't much care. Rights and wrong were Jedi things, Arlen's things and they didn't matter now.

"You say she's one her way?"

"Didn't even have to be asked."

No, of course she wouldn't have. That, above all, was why Tamar hadn't told her.

"Come on," Mekar said, "No time to stand and mope. We've got work to do."

He was right. Nasty, dirty work. Mando work, not Jedi work, but it would be Marin's all the same, and it had been waiting for her from the moment she sliced off Gevern Auch's head.

Mekar started walking, and Tamar followed close behind. There was no escape from the course ahead.

The Mandalorians who'd initially stumbled on the third planet in the Loracan system had considered its breathable atmosphere as vast oceans as a sign it was ripe for colonization. When they actually landed they got the whole story: the seas were so thick with salt a fully-armored warrior could float, and most of the visible land masses were coated in layers of saline dust. There were some worthwhile minerals beneath the surface and various mining operations had lasted for decades, but the Imperial occupation a century ago had brought those to a halt. Today a few stubborn settlers tried to eke out lives there, but the planet hosted no cities worth the name.

A hundred years ago, Kaynar Auch's great-grandfather had been one such stubborn man. Mandalorians needed laborers as much as warriors but the former never got any credit, and the Auch's name hadn't been worth much until Gevern wrestled his way to the top. Few people cared about Clan Auch's nowadays and few of those remembered they still had a family redoubt in an abandoned mining facility on Loracan's southern continent. The place was nestled inside a valley in the mountain chain that cut along the east coast, hundreds of kilometers from the nearest settlement.

Kaynar had taken himself and Yaga there immediately after the killings. He expected retribution; the Skiratas had as much right to it as the Auch's. The law on Mandalore had things to say about blood feuds but Mandos were not, as a rule, big on observing written law.

Kaynar expected them to act. He also expected that, after a little bloodshed on either side, the Skiratas would consider their honor satisfied and back away. Most importantly, he expected the other

scattered remains of Clan Auchs to join him on Loracan now and defend their own honor.

Word that someone had finally avenged the last *Mand'alor's* death was rippling across Mando society and they'd have probable heard anyway, but Kaynar sent a volley of messages anyway. He notified Jerkal's son and daughter, both working as free-range bounty hunters. He notified his cousin Ralnom, who worked at a *beskar* foundry on the homeworld. He sent out fourteen missives in all, each saying the same thing: Come to Loracan and stand together as family.

After that he and his son settled down inside the emptied mining facility and waited.

They waited a day, and no one responded. On the second day he got a short message, text-only, from Jerkal's daughter, saying she was glad someone had restored the family's honor but that she was doing a job in the Elrood Sector, far away.

It took until the third day for someone to finally speak to him in person. It was Ralnom, and Kaynar took his call from *Ultimatum's* cockpit as the ship sat beneath its sensor-jamming camo net. Even before his cousin spoke, Kaynar knew it would be nothing good.

"It was a brave thing you did, boy," Ralnom began. He was five years older than Gevern and he'd always talked to his youngest cousin like an uncle would. That had always rankled. "Your *vode* are resting easy now. You should be proud."

"This isn't over. The Skiratas will want retribution."

"If they come after you it's not just admitting their family killed the *Mand'alor*, it's defending the deed. No, you executed a couple criminals. Everyone agrees that."

"Do they really? What are people saying on Mandalore?"

"They're saying they're glad someone's finally taken care of it. Ekram Shal should have done it years ago but the *chakaar* sat on his hands instead of getting justice done."

"That's all the more reason for us to make our stand here."



"You're more scared of the Skiratas than you should be." Ralnom picked at gray stubble spread over his square jaw. "They're not much of a clan, even now."

Neither are we, thought Kaynar. His cousin was making excuses. He wanted to call the man on it but that would just drive him further away. "The Skiratas have been especially active lately. Rumor has them working with Jedi."

"They encourage those rumors themselves to make them sound tougher than they are." Ralnom gave a dismissive snort. It sounded like someone choking a nerf.

"They were tough enough to kill Gevern," he said severely. "They took everything that mattered from us."

"And now you've got it back again. We're all grateful."

But not, clearly, in his debt. Bitterly he said, "I'm glad. I'll let you know if I need help."

"Of course." Ralnom's head bobbed. "You know how to find me."

Kaynar turned off the transmission and slumped dejected in his seat. When Gevern and Jerkal had been alive they'd been the ones invoking clan honor and most of the time he'd seen through their fancy words and found *osik* beneath. Those words had only taken lofty meaning once they were gone and everyone else stopped using them. Now he'd started using them instead and nobody was falling in line like they had for Gevern and Jerkal. He should have expected it from the start.

Anger came over him like a rushing tide. He didn't scream or shout, but he balled hands into fists and pounded the armrests, the consoles, the nearest bulkhead. It lasted less than a minute and when he was done both hands ached and he slumped dejected in his chair. A wash of shame came next; he was just glad Yaga wasn't there to see his child's tantrum.

He pushed himself out of the seat and went outside. Even so far inland, nestled in the mountains that broke through the salt plains like bones tearing through skin, the air still had a saline rank. Strangely enough he was starting to get used to it. So, apparently,

had Yaga. When Kaynar looked through the levels of the old mining outpost they'd occupied his son was nowhere to be seen.

Kaynar had an idea where he'd gone. A dirt path wound from the outpost up a set of winding mountain trails until they reached an overlook. He trekked up the path, breathing salt air deep as the sun beat hot on his bare head, until he found the spot. Yaga was there, sitting on the cusp of a downward slope. More angular ridges of yellow rock, utterly devoid of vegetation, spread out before them, and over their peaks was the featureless white of the salt plains.

As he sat down beside his son, Yaga asked, "How long do we have to stay here?"

"We'll see."

"When are the others coming?"

"I'm not sure yet. We might not need them."

The boy didn't understand but he nodded anyway. At fourteen he was trying so hard to be an adult.

A wind drifted across the ridgetop. Even on the dry continent the air felt thick. Kaynar had sheltered here with his brothers a few times when he was very young and he'd never liked the planet. He didn't want to contemplate the irony of ending up here again.

After a little while Yaga said, "I'm glad we did what we did, *buir*. It was right."

He delivered the words with a firm certainty only an adolescent could manage. Kaynar felt the weight of his brooding anger lift a bit and said, very truthfully, "I'm glad to hear that, son."

"It wasn't right to let them get away with murder. It went on for too long."

"I know. And you know what else?"

"What?"

"You and me did that, together." He gave his son a tight-lipped smile. "That's something for to be proud of to the end of our days."

Yaga nodded, so young, so earnest, but it still pulled back his earlier anger. In liberating his son from the family's old shame he'd done something he could never regret. It gave him a pride he could hold until the end of his days, whenever that end came.

Marin found Kyrimorut looking exactly as she'd left it, but the mood couldn't have been more different. When she climbed out of her X-wing there was no akk dog waiting for her, no Ninet. Her mother waited until she'd removed her flight suit to exchange a wordless hug. Marin buried her feelings in the Force, hid them. Her mother did the same. They walked side-by-side but distant into the settlement.

Her uncle Mekr had taken charge of preparations. Over a dozen Skiratas, some of whom Marin barely knew, had gathered to prepare their equipment. Spread out across the floor in the central hut was a staggering range of hand-held blasters, rifles, grenades, blades weapons, even shoulder-mounted warhead launchers.

"How much of this is from Lantilles?" Marin asked her mother. It was the first thing she'd spoken since arrival.

"About two-thirds," Mekr answered for her. "Never thought it would come in handy like this, but I won't complain that it has."

"Do you know where Auchs is?"

"Place called Loracan."

"Is that on Mandalore?"

"No, it's a planet on the *shebs*-end of Mando space. Not much there but we've done some asking around. Got a tip Auchs fled to the southern continent."

"Is that enough to find him?"

"It's enough. Having your *jeti* powers on our side ain't going to hurt."

She couldn't hide her wince. Mekr ignored it. She said, "He must be gathering allies, preparing for an attack. Do you know if anyone's joined him?"

"No, which is why we're bringing everyone we can to the party." Mekr spread his arms, taking in the gathered Mandos and their armory. "Besides, it's the least Dorn and Ninet deserve."

Marin scanned the assembled group and found face that surprised her. Old Jovar was seated on a bench at the far end of the circle, carefully examining the rifle resting on his knees. He looked like a man who intended to use it. For some reason Marin felt

drawn to him, and she carefully made her way around the circle. Neither Mekk nor her mother followed.

She stood next to Jovar's bench but didn't sit down. "Hello," she said simply.

He glanced up. "Hello yourself. I didn't expect you to come."

"Why is that?"

"Didn't think it would be your kind of party."

"That's what Mekk called it. A party. There's nothing happy about this."

"No," Jovar agreed. "And he'd agree with you. But it has to be done."

She wanted to ask if he *really* thought this would be justice for Ninet and Dorn but held herself. He was all Mando; of course he believed it. "Are you coming? Personally?"

He looked back at his rifle. "I want to be part of the moment."

"I guess I do too." She'd never seen him in *beskar*. She wondered what he looked like. That drew her thoughts to something else. "What did you do with Ninet and Dorn's bodies?"

"Bodies aren't important to us. You know that."

"Their armor, then."

Jovar sighed and looked over his rifle. To himself he muttered, "Yeah, this one'll do."

"You gave them some kind of memorial, didn't you?"

The old man pushed himself off the bench and laid the rifle down in his place. "None of you touch this one," he called, "It's mine." Then he started shuffling for the exit and waved for her to follow.

Marin did. She'd landed a few hours after dawn hit Kyrimorut and the eastern light was still strong. Jovar stepped carefully through a patch of trees and took her to an overlook spot. Two posts had been pounded into the dirt and a Mandalorian helmet rested atop each: one green, one red. It was a blunt, simple, effective memorial. Marin wouldn't have changed a thing, but the sight still made her weak.

She stepped forward on shaky legs and crouched in front of Ninet's helmet. She reached out and touched it, feeling the minute

dents and scratches in the red *beskar* dome. She remembered how, all those years ago, Ninet had ordered her to try cutting that armor with her lightsaber. She'd made a big point of showing herself as a tough Mando warrior then. Marin realized later it had been Ninet's way of asking for approval.

Now Ninet was gone, irrevocably, and so was her father. Over the years Marin had come to accept her killing of Gevern Auchs as a simple fact of her life, devoid of triumph or regret, always there but deserving of no more conscious thought than a sun at noon. And for all those years this result had been waiting for her. What had come for Dorn and Ninet and it was no one's fault with hers. Crouched there with her hand on the helmet she didn't know whether to sob or scream.

Then Jovar said behind her, "I have a question."

Marin trembled and, very slowly, rose to face him. "Go ahead."

"When we go find Kaynar Auchs, will you use your Jedi powers to fight him?"

It was such an important question, but she'd barely given it a thought. "I don't know."

"This is Mando business. You should fight like a Mando. No Force at all."

"Like you?" It came out harsh, sarcastic.

"Exactly. For the kind of work this is, the Force is no good. Not to you, not to anyone."

"And how do you know *that*? You don't even use it."

He lifted his head a little to watch the sky instead of her. "Not always."

She stared. "When?"

"A long, long time ago. When I was young. I knew what my *buir* was. I knew my *ba'buir* was a Jedi. He didn't hide that from us."

"He didn't teach you how to *use* the Force."

"No. But I knew I could sense things my *vode* didn't. Do things they couldn't, if I put my mind to it. And when I was young like you, I thought I could use that. I thought it would give me an edge. But that Force...." He sucked in breath, shook his head. "I don't like it. It uses you as much as you use it."

"The Jedi teach that you have to surrender to the will of the Force before you enact your own."

"Sounds like mystic hodgepodge to me. Do you believe it?"

"I do," she said, briefly hesitant.

Jovar heard the pause. "There's power in that thing. Too much. Whether it uses you or you use it, I'm not going to say. I don't know which is worse. I like to use power I can understand. Armor and weapons I made myself, my mind, my hands, my fists. That Force... I don't know how anyone can trust it. I can't trust the people who do."

"How long has it been since you last used the Force?"

He laughed lightly. "I stopped keeping track. Fifty years, about. It made my life much.... Simpler."

A soft breeze blew across the overlook. Marin looked back down at the helmets. She wondered if they'd just stay out here. She wondered how sunlight, rain, and time would treat that smooth *beskar*.

"I have another question," said Jovar. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Marin looked back at him. "Okay."

"Who killed Gevern Auchs?"

She stiffened. He didn't look away. "Who do *you* think killed him?"

"Not fair, batting the question back." He shrugged and tilted his head toward the settlement. "We always figured it was either you or Ninet."

"Why?"

"If your *buir* killed Auchs she'd probably be a lot more happy about it. More important, we know how that battle went. She and Dorn were strapped down as prisoners. You and Ninet busted in to save them. And the way you all kept quiet about it, it was pretty clear your parents wanted to protect you. But as to *which* of you... I'd say we ended up split. A little over half thought Ninet did it. Tough Mando girl and all that."

"What did you think?"

"I know the Force," he said softly. "I know what you can do with it, even when you don't mean to."

"It was me," she whispered. She couldn't lie to that stare. "They shouldn't have died. That was meant for me."

Jovar nodded. "Just don't get any ideas."

"About what?"

"About following them. Jedi don't go to the *manda'yaim*. You've got your own thing. Besides, Ninet left you something. Shame not to waste it."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on. Let's ask your *buir*."

Jovar turned and started through the trees. Marin followed easily, and when they got back to the settlement Tamar was there, leaning against the entry to the main hut.

"Didn't keep you waiting, did we?" Jovar asked. Tamar shook her head. "Good. Let's show her."

Marin followed them both back toward Jovar's hut, not knowing what to expect. When she stepped inside she found the table the old man usually used to spread out his swords set out in the middle of the room. Pieces of red *beskar* armor were spread out across it, a complete set of everything barring the helmet.

Marin looked back and forth between them. "This is Ninet's. I thought... I thought Mandos like to hand out pieces of armor to their loves one when they die."

"Well," said Jovar, "Some people get the whole set."

Marin couldn't believe them. "Did she *tell* you this?"

"Not specifically," said Tamar. "But we think she would have liked this. She always said you looked good in her armor."

"I remember," Marin sniffed.

"We'll get a spare helmet for you," said Jovar. "But you're going to wear it all. When you come with us to Loracan you'll be doing Mandalorian business. So you'll *be* a Mando, understand?"

She understood what he meant in every way. All she could do was nod and stare at that armor, that parting gift. She'd worn *beskar* before and knew it was so different from Jedi clothes, more constricting and protective but physically so much heavier. This

armor would feel heavy in too many ways, but she knew it was hers to wear.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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Cloudy skies were a rarity in Galactic City, but the masters of Coruscant's weather control must have chosen today to brew up a storm system and unleash millions of gallons of water to help municipal sanitation crews do their scheduled scrub-down. Allana knew that some Coruscanti looked forward to 'cleaning days,' as they were called, because it meant a break from the carefully manufactured clear skies that spread over the endless city the rest of the time. Back when she'd spent too much time on the capital Allana had agreed with them, but right now the gray clouds that swelled low and swallowed the tops of skyscrapers seemed to rob Galactic City not just of its light but of its spacious majesty.

It was, if nothing else, a fittingly gloomy background for her meeting with the triumvirate. The battle at Orelon had cost the Alliance dearly. Eight capital ships had been destroyed and over a hundred thousand soldiers lost in exchange for less than thirty thousand Hapan loyalists, all in a rescue operation that was supposed to have been bloodless. Before Allana was called in for her audience Admiral Lekwash gave them his statement, and when he stepped out of the chamber and saw her waiting the Quarren's

eyes narrowed on hers, then looked away, and he passed neither advice nor warning as he left.

When she stepped through the door Allana saw the triumvirs at their curved table with a panorama of grey towers and low clouds. A fourth being had joined them there: Senator Avic. As Chair of the Defense Council he had every right to be at this review, but that Allana hadn't been warned in advance made her wary.

"Welcome, Master Djo," Kyrr Esch said tiredly. "Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for inviting me. I'll answer your questions as best I can, though I'm sure Admiral Lekwash gave you a better summary of the battle than I ever could."

"The admiral's given us his thorough review," said Sevlis Morr.

"Given the circumstances, I believe his performance was exemplary."

"A hundred thousand lost," Darris Sevoid said grimly, as if that enough was condemnation.

"They died in the line of duty, bravely. They died to save Alliance citizens."

"Is that what the Hapan loyalists are now?" asked Morr. "*Our* people?"

"They are. As soon as they arrived on New Hapes, the leaders of the surviving loyalists officially petitioned to become residents. As Queen of Hapes I've approved that petition. They are therefore Alliance citizens."

"Yet they were not, at the time of the battle," Sevoid pointed out.

Allana tried to evaluate the human triumvir in the Force. He'd always been stand-offish around her but according to Avic, he'd approved of the Defense Chair's operational plan for Orelon. She had the sense that his normal truculence was being amplified by regret.

"They're alive now because of Alliance action," she said, letting her gaze pass across the table. "Men, women, children, all of whom would have been slaughtered by Serissa Lohr's forces. The loss of life is tragic, but the action was not."

"Admiral Lekwash made the same argument," said Morr.

"Then we're in agreement."

"From a tactical standpoint, his actions were more than sound," Avic said. "When the Hapans sprung their trap he was placed in an extremely difficult situation and did everything he could to both protect his ships and accomplish the mission's original goal."

Allana sensed a *but* coming and it was Sevold who made it. "A necessary duty of any military officer is making hard choices. Sometimes he must decide to save some and leave others to die."

"If we'd have pulled out, *all* those civilians would have died. That would be a stain on our conscience."

"Tsi, we are well aware of the moral arguments," Esch said. "And I assure you, we will give them proper weight. Nothing can be done to change the events at Orelon. And, I think, Admiral Lekwash will suffer no penalty for his actions." He paused, as if giving the other triumvirs a chance to object, then said, "The extent that this informs future Alliance policy is what we must determine."

She understood the full import of his words. After suffering this wound- frankly minor compared to the total scale of its military capability- the Alliance might come away scared and isolationist, reluctant to involve itself in future well-intentioned risks. She'd heard that a group of three thousand senators had already petitioned to create an official inquiry into the triumvirate's misuse of authority in sending the fleet in the first place. None of the triumvirs were warmongers, but they were already being labelled as such.

"There are other unanswered questions," Sevold said. "We hope you might help."

Her foreboding deepened. "I'll do anything I can."

"The trap the Hapans sprung was elaborate, layered, and well-timed. They brought more than enough ships to destroy one suborbital mining station and a picket defense fleet. We find that curious."

"Naturally we're not accusing you or any of your close allies in alerting the Hapans to our mission," added Avic, "But *somehow* they knew to lay a trap. They might have gotten knowledge from a spy among the loyalists."

"That's... possible."

"Do you have another idea?" asked Esch.

"Possibly."

"It's not like Queen Djo to be laconic," said Sevard. "If her majesty has something to say, please say it."

"During the escape from Orelon, we managed to capture one high-ranking enemy."

"Which *we*?" asked Morr.

A good question; even Allana was sometimes confused by her layered allegiances. They weren't going to like the answer. "The prisoner is currently in custody on Ossus."

"And you never thought to tell us until *now*?" Sevard's voice was brittle.

"He surrendered specifically to a member of the Jedi Order I'd sent to help with the evacuation. I've not been to Ossus to see him myself, but I understand he'll only talk to a Jedi."

"We do have ways of... compelling information," Morr said darkly.

"Not from this one. But I assure you, whatever the Jedi learn from him, I will personally tell you."

"We expect continuous updates, then," said Sevard.

"You'll have them," Allana said, and she could sense the distrust coming from them all, even Esch and Avic. They were generally favorable toward the Jedi but they didn't like secrets. In warfare and politics keeping too many could end as badly as spreading them wide.

But this one would have to be handled by the Jedi, and Allana had a feeling what would come next. It was exactly the kind of thing the Jedi would need Alliance help for, but after Orelon they wouldn't get it. And deep down, a grim part of her wondered whether the lives won and lost at Orelon had been worth it after all.

Jade Skywalker stood before the locked door and moved no closer. She was afraid of what she'd find inside. When she stretched out with the Force very hesitantly she could sense him, but he made no effort to touch her back.

"At first he refused to answer any questions until he spoke to you," said K'Kruhk.

She shifted to see the two Jedi behind her. They both towered over her, a Whiphid and a Wookiee, fierce-looking for their claws and teeth and shaggy brown-furred hides, but she'd even known Master K'Kruhk and Grand Master Lowbacca as wise and gentle souls, capable of fighting fiercely but only when they had to. Only K'Kruhk and a handful of other Jedi had been in the room beyond since they'd locked Darth Terrid inside. He was the only one to have gotten any results.

"We finally reached an agreement," the Whiphid said. "We'd allow him to see you once he explained why the loyalists found the bodies of two Sith aboard their station."

"Two?" Jade could only recall the one killed by grenade at the start of the fight. Once they'd disabled the shield generators and fled she'd barely thought of the Sith. The crisis had grown too wide.

"They found two side-by-side in a corridor, a human and a Codru-Ji," explained K'Kruhk. "The bodies of several guards were around them, but these Sith seemed to have been killed by lightsabers."

Jade remembered seeing that Codru-Ji fight. With four blades he'd been a cyclone of red and deadly light. Killing him would have been no easy feat. "What did he say?"

"He said that Sith turned against Sith at Orelon. He said he belonged to the losing side."

It explained much and begged many more questions. Lowbacca, silent until now, gave a low roar.

"I know, Grand Master," Jade sighed. "If there *is* a schism in the Sith... We have to take the opportunity to exploit it. Master K'Kruhk, did he tell you anything else?"

"No. I asked a simple question and received a simple answer. It was the trade I'd asked for."

"And now it's up to me."

Lowbacca reminded her that of all living Jedi she'd known the young Terrid best. She wanted to say that Arlen had trained him as an apprentice and Arlen was on Ossus too, but she knew there was

no way out of this, not when Terrid had requested her and her alone.

"Have you done anything about his leg?" she asked,

"His left thigh-bone is fractured in two places but not broken. We have it set in a bacta cast."

A cast would keep it straight but unless they went to the bone it wouldn't mend fast. The Jedi Temple had healers who could mend the fractures and leave the leg perfect in less than an hour, but of course they hadn't done that yet, not for a Sith Lord.

She was glad. Healing was something they could negotiate for, if it came to that. More importantly, he was a little less dangerous with a damaged leg. Not enough, but a little.

"Okay," she sighed. "I'll do it. You'll be recording, won't you?"

"If we'd placed one in his cell he might have destroyed it." K'Kruhk held out a coin-sized audio transmitter. She plucked it from between two claws, tucked it into the folds of her robes.

"All right. Let's go." She tapped the controls to the door. The panel slid open. She walked through and it slid shut, and then she was alone in the room with Darth Terrid.

The Chiss was sitting on a padded bench with his back to the wall and both legs stretched out in front of him, heels resting on the cold stone floor. Stun cuffs bound his ankles and his wrists. Jade sat on the bench against the opposite wall, a good three meters apart. It had been eight years since they'd last sat across from each other like this, during the flight to Coruscant aboard Abeloth's hijacked star cruiser. When he lifted his head she avoided the arresting glow of his eyes and examined his face. It seemed rougher, more gaunt than she remembered, but maybe her impressions of him were still overlaid with the teenage boy she'd called friend. He was the same age as her, barely forty standard years, but he looked so much older. The Dark Side, they said, was not kind to the body. They said it wasted you from the inside-out, and as she looked at Terrid's face she believed it.

What he said next surprised her. "I think I spoke to your father once in this room. Or one much like it."

"Why would he have locked you in a cell?"

"I wasn't locked in. But he wanted to talk to me what had happened on Varadan."

Varadan. So much had changed there. Her first master, Mjalu, had been killed. She'd seen met her mother's killer for the first time. She, Wharn, and Jodram had barely escaped alive. It was all so long ago, a quarter-century, and she went weeks without even recalling the planet's name.

"I remember Varadan," she said. "We lost a great Jedi there and I had a friend who blamed himself for what happened. He had a hard time after that. He was angry, at himself and at the Sith, and for a while I was afraid he'd get seduced by revenge. But I realized that wasn't right. He hated himself for failing and wanted to prove to himself and everyone else that he was better than his faults." She took a deep breath and said, "That Jedi was my friend. His name was Wharn. And he wasn't you."

"I am what Ran'wharn'csapla became."

"If that's true, then you're right back where you started. You just said so."

Terrid laughed, dry and brittle, like she'd told a sick joke.

"Why did you want to see me? What do you have to tell me you couldn't tell K'Kruhk or Arlen?"

"You'll be able to know I'm telling the truth. You can read me better than the rest, can't you?" He hunched forward, elbows on knees. She avoided looking at his eyes.

"Maybe," she said. "Start talking."

He spread his chained-together hands. "Ask. You know what I told K'Kruhk, don't you?"

She nodded. "Sith killing Sith. I can't say I'm surprised. How'd you end up on the losing side?"

Another dry laugh. "I was their leader."

She stared at his bitter smile and the tightness around eyes but she still didn't meet them. She felt him in the Force: not the frustrated self-punishing drive she remembered from Wharn but an almost resigned and angry self-hate.

"Have the Sith been in the Hapes Cluster all this time?" she asked.

"Thirty-seven standard years," he confirmed.

"They've done a good job hiding themselves. We only learned about you a week ago."

"From the Reboam survivors?" Another laugh, fainter. "I let them go, you know. So I could trace them to their final base and then we'd eradicate them all. It never occurred to me they might pass word of us to the Jedi. But I've been.... Short-sighted. In so many ways."

Jade wasn't in the mood to humor a Sith Lord stuck on self-pity. "The Alliance lost a lot of good people at Orelon. The Jedi lost four good knights. And I can't even tell you what the loyalists lost. How did the Hapans know we were coming?"

He tilted his head thoughtfully. "Why were *you* there, Jade Skywalker? To help the people who murdered your mother? To show them to forgiving, self-sacrificing virtues of the Jedi?"

The sight of those doomed parents saying goodbye to their children would never leave her. "Those people didn't kill my mother. They're victims, just like her, victims of the *Sith*. Now tell me, how did the Hapans know the Alliance was coming?"

His face twisted like he was going to laugh again, but he stopped himself with a tired smile. "Ah, there was no trap, not for the Alliance. Your timing was just.... Unlucky. Or lucky. Maybe the Force orchestrated everything just to put you and I together in this room."

"I don't believe that," she lied. She wasn't sure what she believed.

"We had no idea the Alliance was coming. We didn't know you were there either."

"And all those Battle Dragons hiding in the Transitory Mists?"

"For me." He raised both hands, tapped his chest. "For us. For the Sith whose... ambition outstripped our wisdom."

"These other Sith you fought, who do they serve?"

He took a deep breath and released. "A former Jedi of the Old Republic. His name is Darth Krayt."

Jade shuddered. She'd heard that name, been told about him by her father, her grandfather, her aunt. Luke Skywalker had battled



Abeloth with him almost sixty years ago. Jaina Solo had driven her lightsaber into his back on Zonama Sekot. There had never been a body to prove his death and all the time the Jedi had been painfully uncertain about his fate.

Jade, though, had never been uncertain, not since her vision on the planet where they'd found Abeloth. Just like her grandfather before her, she'd seen a vision of the future where a man in Yuuzhan Vong body armor was sitting on a Throne of Balance, surrounded by Sith acolytes. On her return to Ossus she'd spoken with Jaina and found what she'd feared: her description of the man on the throne matched Darth Krayt.

"Where is he now?" she asked.

Terrid sighed. "You must understand. Krayt is an absent father. He's been sleeping in stasis for decades, watched over by his most loyal servants, while the rest of us- his so-called One Sith- must labor toward a dream we'll never live to see."

"Doesn't sound very Sith-like. Too selfless."

"Exactly."

"And that's why you tried to rebel."

"This Sith promised me the power to remake things as I wanted. Then they made me the servant of a Darth Lord who never even *speaks* to his minion." His chained hands curled to fists. "I wanted to be better and stronger than I was. Krayt's vision offered me nothing."

For man who promised to tell the truth he was being very evasive with his answers. "You didn't answer my initial question. Where is Krayt?"

Another laugh, short this time. "Where else would the Sith go to work in secret? They've taken over the old Jedi base at Shedu Maad."

It made sense. She'd half-expected it, which was why surprise didn't distract her from the *they* he'd used. "Describe the Sith base."

Terrid nodded and, in more detail than she'd expected, explained the changes the Sith had made to the Jedi academy there. He described not only the old pyramid they'd repurposed but the two new ones they'd built and the military-grade defenses placed

around it using Kuati tech. Jade had never been to Shedu Maad herself but Lowbacca and other Jedi listening to her audio-feed had, and they'd know if what he'd said was plausible. Next he described the deep subterranean chamber beneath the main pyramid where Darth Krayt slept, guarded by heavy stone doors and the ever-watchful eye of his most trusted servant, a female Chagrian named Darth Wyyrlok.

That part surprised Jade. Her father had told her about another Chagrian by the same name, a male who'd also been Darth Krayt's loyal aide sixty years ago. Ben Skywalker had killed that one on Zonama Sekot.

She didn't know what to make of that. If Terrid was lying it was an odd lie to tell. When he finished his description he hunched forward a little more and said, "That's the extent of the Sith presence there. Now you know what you need to do."

"What do you mean?" She still couldn't look into his eyes.

"You *know* what I mean. So does whoever's listening. I've told you what you need to smash the One Sith and destroy them, forever."

"You want us to do the job you couldn't, is that it?"

She expected him to laugh or sneer but the comment seemed to pile weight on him. His head lowered a little; his face drew longer. "They broke me once. Then they remade me and then they broke me again. Does it surprise you that I want to see them hurt?"

"No. But if you think we're going to rush to Shedu Maad and kill Krayt just because you say so, you've really forgotten how the Jedi Order works."

His head fell even lower and his shoulders shook with a sigh. As she stared down at the back of his neck he said, "The Queen of Hapes is a Sith."

Seven words shook her more than anything in this conversation. It was so incredible she groped for reasons to deny it. "The Hapans purged themselves of Force-users centuries ago."

"Sometimes the Force manifests from nowhere. Sometimes it slips through generations unnoticed."

Then she remembered the Chalks, Elliah and Hogrum. The Force-sensitive siblings had elected to come to Ossus instead of stay on New Hapes, to Jade's pleasant surprise. They were distant relatives of Queen Serissa, sharing some great-grandparent.

It was believable. It was also terrifying. If Serissa was a servant of Lord Krayt then the entire Hapes Cluster was effectively a miniature empire for the Dark Lord.

"I've spent much time in the Fountain Palace. I know its secret corridors. I know her rooms." She heard Terrid's anger and felt raw hatred. "You'll have to launch two strikes. Destroy Krayt and Wyyrlok at Shedu Maad. Destroy Darth Saydel in her palace."

If Serissa was Saydel then attacking either would be incredibly dangerous. The Jedi were powerful warriors, but they had nothing that could battle the entire might of the Hapan military. From her last conversation with Allana, they couldn't expect help from Coruscant either. The bloody nose received at Orelon seemed to have cowed the Alliance.

"You're asking too much," Jade whispered.

Terrid's head snapped up. His red eyes caught hers before she could look away. "That's why I wanted you here, Jade. If I told this to any other Jedi they'd think I'm lying, that I'm setting them up for a trap. But I'm not. Touch me with the Force, Jade. Look into my mind. *Feel* what I feel, and you'll know I'm telling the truth."

"You can't expect me to—"

"Do it!" he shouted.

She did; not because he commanded but because he was right. There was only one way to know the truth, so she placed her hands flat on her thighs in a basic meditative pose, closed her eyes, breathed deep and steady, and reached out to touch this mind that was so dark and foreign, yet was all more the more awful for the faint echo of the boy she'd known.

He didn't resist when she looked into his mind. She found all she'd felt tentatively before: the frustration and self-disgust and bitter resignation; the rage simmering beneath that, ready to fire up hotter than ever with the smallest spark. He wanted to hurt. He wanted revenge.

And she pried deeper. She found flickers of memory at the surface of his thoughts. He was tumbling through the clouds of Orelon VI and when he landed on the station's surface she felt the crack of his leg so sharp it might have been her own. He was in his starfighter over the gas giant, tense with anticipation. He was speaking to a human in black robes with a bald scarred face that looked faintly familiar. And he was leaning close to a beautiful black-haired young woman in royal robes, running his hands over her body and feeling the heat of her breath against his face. Something in their passion felt like a dark inversion of the stable, enriching love Jade had shared with Jodram. This memory filled the Sith with the harshest anger of all: rage at the worst kind of betrayal.

And as her mind withdrew from his she felt a touch of something else, something that stirred memories of the friend lost long ago. Mixed with all the indignation and anger was the shame of a boy who'd aimed so high, to a place he could never reach; a boy who refused to accept failure and tried to rectify any way he could.

And it struck her that this was the cruelty of the Sith manifested. They claimed to offer power but really gave out corruption. There had been other parts to the Wharn she'd known- curiosity, empathy, generosity- but the Sith had beaten those all from him long ago, leaving only stubborn soulless ambition.

"Why are you crying?" she heard him say.

Suddenly she was out of his mind and back in her own. She was staring at him from three meters away as they sat on their benches. His face was twisted in anger. She reached to her own and felt just a few specks of tears, barely spilled from the corners of her eyes.

"Don't cry for me, Jade Skywalker," Terrid sneered. "Don't cry! Don't pity me! *Don't!*"

She jerked to her feet. As she stared down at him she spoke slowly to keep her voice from cracking. "We'll consider everything you've told us. I... I know you were telling the truth. In everything."

He stared up at her, just stared with those narrow red eyes. Even when they'd been young she'd found their featureless glow disconcerting. Now she felt she looked through them, into everything Terrid was now and had been before.

Without a word she broke their stare, stepped through the door, and locked it behind her. The hallway beyond was graciously empty. She fumbled into her robe, found the audio transmitter, and switched it off. Then she slumped against the wall and tried to get her emotions under control. Though a door now separated them, Terrid might still be able to sense her pity.

Elliah Chalk had insisted that, rather than disembark with the old nobles at New Hapes, they continue riding with their rescuers to the Jedi Temple on Ossus. Her brother had objected, not because he wanted to stay on New Hapes or because he believed the old horror-stories about Jedi, but because he thought they'd have nothing to do.

After two local days on Ossus, Elliah was willing to concede Hogrum's point. Despite that she wasn't bored, at least not yet. The Jedi were less rigid and more gracious than she'd expected. They hardly seemed like an elite military order and even less like a cult. Entire chambers, from sunlit gardens to monastic cells, were set aside for meditation. When she wandered the halls she encountered what felt like only a scant handful of fellow humans. She'd never seen aliens before except on holos and like the Jedi they'd usually been exaggerated and villainous. Over the past two days she'd seen huge furry creatures four times her size and squat gray-skinned ones half her height, yet the plain brown robes they wore seemed to bespeak not just a unity among them but equality. From a distance she'd glimpsed the supposed Grand Master of this Order, a giant long-furred humanoid, but he wore the same plain robe as anyone else.

The Hapan loyalists had clung to aristocratic pretension because they had nothing else to cling to, and Elliah had wanted to get far away from that. Now she was as far away as possible and she felt absolutely bewildered. But at least she wasn't bored.

Something major was happening. Apparently the Jedi had taken a prisoner at Orelon- one of Serissa's henchmen, a *Sith*, whatever that meant. Jade Skywalker had tried to explain it to her at the station and Elliah had partially grasped it, but while Jade was on

supposedly Ossus, Elliah hadn't seen anything of her. She was probably busy with the Sith she'd captured.

It was a mild balm to know she wasn't the only one on Ossus without purpose. The three so-called Imperial Knights that helped pull her and Hogrum off the sinking station seemed to be stuck here with no ride back home. On their first day together the Knights, probably from lack of anything better to do, had sat down with Elliah and Hogrum and explained who they were, what they were doing on the Jedi ship, and why they were emphatically *not* Jedi, even though they had a lot of the same powers and followed the same teachings. Subtle differences in mystic philosophy went over Elliah's head, but she knew a political schism when she saw one.

Apparently there was something important going down in their corner of the galaxy and they all ached to be there and help. She didn't know how much they could do; the oldest one, Treis, had only a few years on her. The middle one, Roan, was her age exactly. And also, apparently, a Prince of the Empire.

Elliah knew regal pretension too and she definitely saw it in Roan, but he was different from the young Hapan nobles she'd known. She saw it in that conversation the first night. She saw it more when she ran into him the next day.

Her free-range wanderings led her into a lush and surprisingly spacious garden. Late-afternoon sunlight fell through high windows and dyed the green leaves and colorful flowers into shapes of gold and bronze. They'd had hydroponics chambers and artificial gardens at Reboam and Orelon, but this felt different. Just being here made her feel vaguely hopeful, though she had no idea what future she could have now.

She found Roan by himself, standing on packed soil near the slanting transparisteel, watching the sun set over the desert.

She didn't say anything, but he knew she was there and turned. The Force, she figured. What she and Hogrum shared with each other, these Knights could do so much better.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you," she said.

"No, it's quite alright," he said. Stiff, reserved, maybe a little haughty, but not like the aristocrats she'd known. Despite being born a prince he seemed a little uncertain about what that *meant*, even though he tried to hide his uncertainty; from her and maybe himself. More, she knew he was worried about his brother, who was apparently stuck behind enemy lines far away. These Imperial Knights, and probably the Jedi too, weren't ones to sit safe and secure in their fancy gowns and send disposable soldiers off to die.

"It's a lot better view than anything I've seen in years," she muttered. "But you probably don't know what that's like. What was the capital of your Empire called?"

"Bastion. It's a temperate world. Rain, sunshine. Forests, fields, oceans." He paused. "I've heard Hapes is pleasant."

"I think so... I'm not sure how much I remember. When I was a child, I spent all my time in Fountain Palace. I haven't been there in seven years but I still remember every room I could get into, every secret passage Hogrum and I used to find. But outside the Palace... I don't know." She looked out the window. "What kind of palace do *you* live in?"

"I don't," he said. She looked at his face and saw something new: wry amusement.

"Your father's an Emperor but he doesn't have a palace?"

"We have... an estate. But we've been at war, like I told you, so we've had limited resources, and my father thinks it would be bad taste to build himself a palace when he's supposed to be fighting the enemy."

That sealed it. These Imperials were nothing like Hapans. She found herself favorably disposed. "Who was emperor before your father?"

"There was no emperor."

"How could you have an Empire without an emperor?"

Roan gave her something else new: a single dry laugh, like she'd stumbled on a private joke. "It's complicated. I can't believe you've never heard of the Galactic Empire."

He said it with a little smile and she wasn't sure if she was being condescended to. "I knew there was an Empire a hundred years ago. And I knew that it fell."

"Not entirely."

"I'm sorry, Hapan history is.... skewed. And I didn't have much time for education running from Serissa's armies for the past seven years."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. And I'm sorry you can't get back to your people."

"We've been told to stay put for now. My *father* told us that." He didn't hide his resentment.

She offered, "He wants to keep you safe."

"I know. That's what worries me."

She didn't know what he meant. A little awkwardly she said, "I know you've been in lots of battles. Maybe this is different."

"Vitor is out there," he said. "I don't know where. But somewhere. And he's in grave danger. My father doesn't want to risk losing us both."

"Ah," Elliah said, because nothing else came.

"And Vitor..." Roan scowled, shook his head. "My brother's been acting... strange. I don't know why."

The silence between them felt tense. The sunlight was getting deeper and darker, casting the desert outside in harsh but beautiful reds. She said, "I hope he comes back."

Roan swallowed hard and nodded. Then he said, "Excuse me," and turned away.

She watched him disappear down a winding path, watched the lush garden hide him from view. Then she turned her eyes back to the desert. They were stuck on Ossus together but Roan's situation seemed an inversion of her own. He knew what he wanted to do and where he wanted to be but couldn't. After seventeen years Elliah knew what she did *not* want to be, but it seemed the only life waiting for her.

She felt for him, even though she barely knew him. He was stiff, reserved, definitely haughty sometimes, but also interesting. She didn't feel as adrift with him as she did with all these alien



magicians in their brown monk's robes. It was a small thing, but it meant a lot.

After accepting that he'd come to the research station in Zonama Sekot's southern wastes for something bigger than himself, Kol Skywalker almost began to enjoy his work. That wasn't the way he enjoyed his mostly-boring role as carrier of objects between the Alliance and Yuuzhan Vong laboratories, but he could better appreciate how his small actions helped the greater process of healing the poisoned biosphere. And once he appreciated his place, he started finding other things to appreciate too. He was finally starting to understand scraps of Nei Rin's shapers' jargon, and their equivalent terms used by the xenobiologists.

During some lunch breaks the research assistant, Neita, would invite Kol to sit with her. She'd ask him earnest questions about what it was like for the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong living together on this strange planet. The senior scientists, the reedy Ho'din and chirping little Mrlssi, asked him their own questions, mostly about his experience with the planet's so-called governing intelligence. Kol regretted that he'd had none personally, which left them disappointed, but he told them what he'd heard second-hand. The only one of the Alliance scientists who still seemed annoyed by his being around was the other human research assistant, a young man named Rennis. Kol couldn't tell why he was disliked but he could guess. Jedi weren't popular in some parts of the Alliance. His father was particularly and unjustly reviled. Nobody was advertising that Kol's father was Jodram Tainer; Tahiri had told him not to mention it at all. But still, some of them must have figured. Maybe Rennis had lost a loved one when Abeloth attacked Coruscant. Maybe he had another reason to dislike Jedi. It hurt Kol to be hated for something that wasn't his doing, and he was too afraid to ask Rennis what had caused his spite.

That was a small scar, though, compared to everything else. Once night fell and the scientists and shapers retired for dinner and rest, Kol and Nei Rin would sometimes go into the dark laboratories. Or, more accurately, Nei Rin would drag Kol back to

the shapers' lab and enthusiastically explain the day's progress, even though he still only understood a fraction of it. He didn't mind; he enjoyed seeing the girl's passion.

One evening, after about a week of working, Nei Rin led him down the connecting corridor and into the Alliance laboratory. Kol was surprised when she pulled herself onto a stool near the largest work table and began looking over the datapads the scientists had left after ending their day's work.

"How much of that do you know how to work?" asked Kol. He didn't expect to see her use Alliance technology so readily. Master Shaper Neshri Yim refused to work their cold metal datapads at all and insisted his assistants transfer the data to his organic qahsas.

"I can work them easily," the Yuuzhan Vong girl said as she tapped the buttons and scoured the screen. "I have seen *you* use them often enough."

"Okay. But how much of that do you, you know, understand?"

"How much do *you* understand, *Jeedai*?"

More of the words, less of the meaning, but he got her point. Nei Rin went back to reading over the datapad. Kol shifted awkwardly as he stood in the dark laboratory. He didn't know what the scientists would do if they found the two children in here after hours. He didn't think it would be anything severe- they were all on the same side after all- but it would still be embarrassing to get caught.

While Nei Rin worked he closed his eyes and stretched out in the Force. It didn't come as naturally to him as it did to Nat, let alone Jaina or Tahiri, but after slowing his breathing and calming his mind he could search for other people nearby. He felt minds still awake but distant: the Alliance researchers, his great-aunt and Tahiri, the Jedi who helped run the facility. Of the Yuuzhan Vong shapers and the girl next to him he felt nothing. That bothered Jedi who came to Zonama Sekot the first time but it didn't worry Kol. Partially he was used to it, but more importantly he believed the assurances from Tahiri and Jaina that the Yuuzhan Vong *did* exist in the Force, in their own way, even if they'd been effectively quarantined to a different plane of it when their race turned to war.

Kol didn't understand what that meant exactly, or how it had worked, but was certain Nei Rin had a mind and soul just like he did, even if his senses were too limited to find it. He hoped that one day these people would be able to go back into a galaxy that accepted them. It would heal the wounds in countless hearts and maybe even heal the Force too.

It was a hope sweet enough to get lost in, and when Kol eventually opened his eyes he found the stool and table vacated. He looked around and found Nei Rin hunched by desk in a corner.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Kol whispered.

"Is there a problem?" She kept looking at the new datapad she'd found.

"Everything at that station belongs to that one assistant, Rennis."

"And?"

"I don't know. He might keep his personal stuff in there."

"Why would I want to read personal things? I am shaper. This file here is very scientific."

"Well. Okay then." Kol still didn't like it but he wasn't sure how to tear her away.

"Is there a problem with Assistant Rennis?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. He doesn't like me, that's all."

She glanced up from her pad. "Why would he dislike you, *Jeedai*?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's *because* I'm a Jedi."

"Foolish reason. Your people liberating mine from our bloodthirsty false gods."

"I know, but some people... well, that have their reasons. Or think they do."

"Like they have reasons to dislike the Yuuzhan Vong?"

"No. I mean, yes, kind of—"

"I understand what you mean." Nei Rin looked back at the datapad. As she kept reading she mused, "We all hope this project can mark a new cooperation. If we succeed in restoring this ecosystem together it would be a wonder. If we could restore the

ecosystems on the all the Alliance worlds my people seeded during the war..."

She trailed off; apparently something on the pad had grabbed her attention. Kol saw her point clearly. The situation on Arquilla that had tangled up Nat and Arlen was a perfect example. The Duros and Tynnans there wouldn't have to fight if they could just go back to their homeworlds. And if the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong together could make that possible-

"Ah," said Nei Rin.

"Ah? Ah what?" He looked over her shoulder. The text on the pad was gibberish to him.

"This datapad. It collects a thorough genetic analysis of nearly sixty different samples of Yuuzhan Vong-form life. Plants, fungi, animals, *us*." She tapped her chest.

"Okay? And?"

"There is a program here. It runs simulations predicting the interaction between our biots and different artificial and naturally-occurring substances from Alliance worlds."

Kol still didn't get it. "What's the problem?"

She put down the pad and looked at him. "*Jeedai*, all the substances being tested are *poisons*."

"But... what *kind* of poisons? I mean, lots of stuff that's harmful to Vongformed life is *harmless* to humans and vice versa. Right?" He was pretty sure he'd heard that before.

"The test substances.... Many of them are innocuous if used on species from your galaxy, but all are predicted as harmful to Yuuzhan Vong."

There seemed no good explanation for that. "What should we do?"

She picked up the datapad. "We must show the Master Shaper. And the Master *Jeedai*."

"Wait, wait, let's just.... Think about this."

"They *must* see this. Now."

"Hold on. Let's just wait until tomorrow morning, when they're all awake and thinking clearly. And you can't take that datapad. Rennis would notice."

"Can you copy the files?"

"I think so. Hold on." Thanks to his week as an errand-boy, Kol knew the scientists kept a drawer with spare blank data-cards. He found a card, plugged it into the datapad, and copied all the data he could.

"We'll show this Jaina and Tahiti first thing tomorrow," Kol told her. "After that he'll probably want to talk to Rennis and the other researchers. There could be a good explanation for this."

"I would like to hear it," Nei Rin said darkly.

"Yeah," Kol whispered, "Me too."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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When the *Jagged Fel*'s broad white blade plunged into realspace outside the Kovix-589 asteroid belt, Davek was there at the fore of the bridge. As emperor it was important to lead from the front, and it was important to be *seen* leading. He draped silver robes over his old admiral's uniform, striking what he hoped was the proper combination of regal and martial. Leadership was always about symbols, as he'd learned repeatedly over the past eight years, but today symbols mattered less than actions. It harkened back to his days as a mere officer, but what should have been comforting ground left him tense instead. This was going to be a long and bloody fight.

Admiral Jaeger's Fourth Fleet had spread itself around the section of the asteroid belt where Veers' ships hid. As Davek's First Fleet did the same, the *Jagged Fel* received an influx of tactical data straight from Jaeger's *Afsheen Makati*. The minerals on the asteroids scrambled even advanced sensors but they couldn't block visual scans, and after surrounding the enemy on all sides, Jaeger's fleet had glimpsed enough to piece together an accurate count of the ships Veers had in his arsenal.

One super star destroyer. Eleven more smaller destroyers, a mix of *Impellor*-, *Compellor*- and *Predator*-classes. With the combined

First and Fourth Fleets, Davek outgunned Veers five to one, and most of Veers' ships were probably under-supplied and under-manned.

None of that counted unless they could get through the asteroid belt. Davek took reports directly from Jaeger and then from Marasiah, whose Jedi-piloted TIE Sabers had been slowly working themselves into the outskirts of the asteroid belt, looking for an easy way to identify mines and gun turrets. They both reported no success.

Davek knew everyone in his assembled fleets had to be feeling what he was now. They were so close to ending this but agonizingly far. Hundreds of thousands of good soldiers were readied for one last fight, and too many of them wouldn't get to see the end of the eight-year battle for the Empire's soul.

All of them deserved better. Davek couldn't do anything about that, but he could try and allay the fear they must all be feeling. That, too, was an Emperor's role.

"Captain Yorus," Davek announced, still at the head of the bridge so all could see him, "Please prepare a broadcast to all ships."

"At once," the Muun nodded. Thirty seconds later he reported, "We're ready to 'cast from your comlink, Your Majesty."

Davek plucked the comm cylinder from his admiral's uniform, then took a deep breath and flicked it on. He stared out at the stars and drifting asteroids ahead as he said, "This is Emperor Davek Fel. Very soon we will begin the final battle of this war. When it is complete the last of the terrorists who murder civilians in the name of 'restoring' Palpatine's dream will be erased from history. Once they are gone we will move forward as one Empire, reinvigorated and bold, into a future of our own making.

"This will not be an easy battle but as your Emperor I will say this. I am proud to have servants as brave and loyal as you. My gratitude is to each and every soldier, and I promise that once this battle is done you will have a chance to lay down the swords you've carried for so long and savor what you've earned through all your sacrifice.

"I thank you. The trillion peoples of the Empire thank you. Now, together, let us make an end of it."

He turned off the comlink and severed the broadcast. The bridge crew was still and reverent at his back. This was a situation where he wished he had the Force like Marasiah and Arlen, like his mother, so that he could truly gauge their reaction to his words.

But he couldn't dwell on that long. He had one more call to make. "Captain Yorus," he said, "Please prepare a direct transmission. Hail *Nemesis* and see if they want to talk."

The spread of asteroids in which the Restorationist fleet hid was a screen that worked both ways, jamming the sensors of both the ships outside and those within. The Restorationists, however, had been here for years, and they had advantages the enemy did not. The unmanned turbolaser turrets installed on over three hundred drifting asteroids had sensors of their own, as well as transmitters that allowed for direct commands from *Nemesis*. These transmitters also worked in reverse, feeding types and telemetry of ships outside the belt to the super star destroyer's bridge.

As Darth Kroan stood on the command deck, hovering behind Veers and Grave as they all watched the data resolve on their tactical display, he decided this was about the response he'd expected. One massive Imperial fleet had reverted to realspace five hours ago and spread itself to blockade the section of the belt in which the Restorationists hid. The ships made no attempt to get through the asteroids, nor did they broadcast any message, which meant they were waiting for someone.

Five hours after their arrival, another fleet of equal strength showed up and began fanning out as well, tightening the siege net spread around the outside of the belt.

Kroan could feel the men and women on the bridge grow tense, but Veers and Grave assessed the situation with admirable aplomb. Some of Veers' calm was coming from the flask he kept in his pocket but periodically withdrew for sips, apparently uncaring who noticed. Grave, though, was intently studying the display, mind busied by possibilities. He was trying to think of ways to deliver



maximum attrition on the enemy; it was clear they there'd be no easy escape from this.

Not for a super star destroyer, anyway. Kroan was still confident that *Intruder*, combined with the Force, would allow him to slip through the asteroid field and escape when things got desperate. He'd come here hoping these Restorationists would appreciate the help only a Sith Lord could provide. He'd not expected to find Corrien Veers reduced to a carless drunk and certainly hadn't expected Davek Fel to lay siege soon after his arrival, but before this ended Fel and his Imperial Knights could come out grievously wounded. Kroan figured that was worth lingering to see.

Grave was coming up with a strategy in his head, but he didn't seemed inclined to share it with Veers or the black-robed Sith who'd shown up suddenly and whom he clearly didn't trust. Something on the display made his eyes widen, and as he turned to the communications station to relay order the comm lieutenant spoke first.

"Admiral, we're receiving an incoming transmission."

"Is it from the *Jagged Fel*?" asked Grave.

"Yes, sir. It is."

Grave walked over. "All right. I will speak with-"

"No," Veers said. "I'll do it."

The two men stared at each other. Grave said, "You've always refused to speak to the pretender."

"Really? I'd forgotten. I'm so glad I have you to remind me of these things." Veers shouldered past the admiral and told the comm lieutenant, "Let me talk to Fel. I'm sure he'd love to hear the sound of my voice on last time."

Grave stood planted where he was, watching Veers' back and trying very hard not to let frustration get to him. Veers stood in front of the console as a shrunken blue holo-image appeared. The man had a trim dark beard and draped regal robes off his shoulders, with an Imperial officer's uniform beneath.

Veers got the first word in. "You've found us at last. Congratulations to you and your Jedi puppet-masters."

"Moff Veers, this is the *true* leader of the Empire, Davek Fel. I demand you surrender your fleet to my authority. I'm prepared to offer limited amnesty to your soldiers provided all officers ranking captain and above present themselves to me in surrender."

"A tempting offer, but I'm afraid you'll have to come and get us."

"As Emperor I hereby—"

Veers reached over the lieutenant's shoulder and turned off the holo. He glanced at Grave and Kroan, shrugged, and said, "Well? What would *you* have done? That conversation wasn't going anywhere."

Veers and Grave just glared at each other. Kroan looked at the tactical holo and observed, "They're starting to move closer to the belt."

Veers trolled up to his side. "If they want to get themselves chewed the shrapnel, I say let them. All those turrets and mines *are* operational, aren't they, Admiral?"

"Very much so." Grave forced his attention on the display. "Our vanguard TIE squadrons are getting close. Their IFF beacons will keep the turrets from firing on them, but they'll be able to lure Fel's ships into damage zones."

"Excellent," hummed Veers.

Grave looked over his shoulder and called, "Captain Fenrec?"

*Nemesis'* gaunt and gray-haired commander made his way across the bridge. "Yes, Admiral?"

"Has there been any progress on the search for the infiltrator?"

"Not yet, sir. We've ordered all cortosis-armor stormtroopers to report to the main hangar for checks."

"No infiltrator's going to march into that," Veers commented. "He'll probably ditch that armor and try to sneak around some other way."

"No one has attempted to use the stolen ID card since he sent the signal to Bastion," Fenrec told Grave. "We suspect he's picked a place aboard to hide and is holding position."

On a ship this massive a man who picked a good hiding spot could go months without being found, and as long as the ship was on alert for the infiltrator it would draw attention and resources

best needed for the fight. It occurred to Kroan that however this infiltrator had gotten aboard- and though he didn't say it, Grave seemed to have an idea how- it was very possible this infiltrator had the Force to aid him. Using Imperial Knights as elite agents was just the sort of thing Fel would try.

"I believe I may be of assistance, Admiral," Kroan told Grave.

The man gave him a wary look, but before he could respond Veers crowed in triumph.

"Ah, you see that!" He pointed at the tactical holo, where a few blinking red lights on the outermost edge indicated the detonation of the first mines. "He'll be lucky if he has half a fleet by the time he reaches us."

And then, in full view of the bridge, Corrien Veers plucked out his flask, unscrewed the lid, raised it toward the holo in salute, then look a long and satisfied gulp.

Even Restorationist ships had difficult getting in and out of the asteroid belt. The transponders attached to each ship broadcast a friendly signal to the automated turrets and mines, but slabs of space rock hung and drifted through space in an aimless jungle, and in the dim light of distant Kovix-589 you could barely see some asteroids until they were right in front of you.

Getting back to *Nemesis* aboard his shuttle had been a slow, aggravating crawl. Now that Vull was back in the cockpit of a TIE Saber he felt marginally better. He could never forget his failure at Kor Vosadii and the doom he'd brought down on them, but at least he was in a TIE. At least he was fighting the direct, simple fight of spacecraft and warheads and plasma lances dancing through the void. There was an elegance in life-or-death combat and he'd yearned for it after all these years of hiding.

A mix of shielded TIE Sabers and smaller TIE-X interceptors had spread out in all directions through the asteroid belt. Vull's squadron- which he'd decided to name the Breakers after his old bomber squad from so long ago- began by vectoring toward the prominent white wedge of a *Legator*-class star destroyer. Vull guessed it was the *Afsheen Makati*, once Admiral Davek Fel's

flagship, later passed on to his protégé Devlin Jaeger. Jaeger, like Fel and Vull, was a former Voidwalker. Sometimes it seemed like a cruel twist of fate was all that had allowed Jaeger to climb ranks on Fel's cape while Vull ended up a fugitive. Had he been placed stationed on *Makati* when this civil war broke out instead of Veers' super star destroyer, everything might have been different. Or not; it was dangerous to think about that now.

Because these asteroids jammed sensors so badly they had to rely on their eyes. The *Makati*'s eight-kilometer wedge was their guiding marker as the twelve TIEs slipped carefully around the ever-moving space rock, but they also had to watch for other ships moving through the belt. TIE fighters left dimmer thrust-trails than Alliance fighters but if you looked carefully you could still spot their moving lights. Vull caught a cluster of them winking in and out of view and opened a channel to his squadron.

"All Breakers," he said, "Enemies moving at point oh-five. Can I get secondary confirmation?"

"I have visual too, Lead," said Breaker Five.

"All ships, break formation. Prepare to engage. Targets of opportunity."

Dogfighting was messy, confusing business in the best situations. Doing it in the middle of dense asteroid belt was begging for fatal accidents, but that was what this mission required. At least they'd die fighting, Vull thought. He just hoped they got to deal some damage before the end.

When Marasiah had ordered Knight Squadron and its twelve TIE Sabers into the asteroid belt, they'd complied without objection. They knew that their ultimate goal was to reach the enemy flagship as quickly as possible, but also to remain intact. Haste battled with caution and as they entered the belt and discovered just how dense and difficult it was to navigate. Marasiah knew caution had to take priority or they could all get killed, and if that happened there'd be no one to rescue Vitor.

Her son was alive. She could feel him, distant but present on the enemy flagship. She hadn't even tried to hide it from the other

Imperial Knights; they'd sense her worry anyway. As a lifelong pilot she'd learned how to focus on the obstacles directly ahead but the danger to her son made it so much harder.

Her sensors were useless but she still had the Force, and it gave her a second's warning when the attack came. She sensed murderous intent veered toward them and so did her pilots, and without a comm signal they knew to break their already-loose formation and scatter.

The TIE Sabers fell on them with an equally messy charge. Lasers from the lead ships scattered on Marasiah's shields and she broke upward. A black-shadowed asteroid swallowed the view ahead and she wrestled her control stick in another hard turn, just barely avoiding a collision. The enemy Saber seemed to have lost her and she kicked her fighter clear of any space rock to try and get a view of the battle.

More lasers rocked her ship; with sensors scrambled she couldn't tell from where. She used the Force instead and felt lethal intent from below. She twisted her TIE to one side, then dove in time to see the other ship charging head-on. Her laser-spray scattered on its forward shields, not breaking them but robbing the pilot of a forward view, which was all he had without sensors. At that same moment a missile arced in from behind, pushed through the TIE's shields, and detonated.

As Marasiah broke clear of the fireball she felt another mind touch hers in the Force. She sent Katrin Mulk thanks for the save just before a wave of pain washed across the battle-meld. They'd just lost a pilot, and Marasiah swung her ship around in time to spot the dying embers of Knight Ten's ship. She also saw the thick green laserfire flashing out from one asteroid.

She knew Davek had sent initial fighter-waves into the asteroid belt to find and trigger these turbolaser batteries, then pick them apart and pave way for the bigger ships to start pushing through. She also knew that if Knight Squad stopped to disarm every battery, they'd never get to *Nemesis* in time to save Vitor.

All those other squadrons had one mission. Knight Squad had its own.

Marasiah flicked on her comm and said, "All Knights, keep clear of the hot spot and stay on target. We head for *Nemesis* and stop only long enough to clear our backs."

She said it aloud so there'd be no mistake. The attacking TIE Sabers had scattered and would return soon, but while they had the chance they had to press forward and continue the long crawl through this death-maze, even if they triggered another turret or mine and took another loss.

It was a battle that could last forever, and she knew the only way to end it without massive casualties was to disable all those hidden emplacements. Until then, there was only the bloody slog.

Vitor knew that once he sent the signal to his father, the whole ship would start looking for him. He ran through every possibility in his head, anticipating what the Restorationists would do to hunt one man with a stolen armor-suit and ID card. Using the card would surely get him caught, so Vitor carefully disposed of it in a refresher waste-bin. Ditching the armor would mark him right away but the ship's security would also be alert for solo soldiers in cortosis gear. He needed to find one place to hide and stay there. He also knew that if he didn't find some way to help his father disable all those mines and turrets in the asteroid belt, this battle could drag on for weeks or months.

When the idea hit him, he cursed himself for not having it before. The ship he'd stowed away on must have gotten through the asteroid belt somehow; either it had a map of where all those emplacements were, or it transmitted a friendly signal to their IFF receivers. Either of those could save thousands of lives, and if he were aboard the ship he'd also be able to send another signal to his father without alerting the crew aboard *Nemesis*.

He doubted *Nemesis* received frequent arrivals, so it was likely the Restorationists had figured out which ship he'd come aboard on. Whether they'd think to add extra guards around it was something he'd have to find out for himself.

Retracing his steps back to the hangar was a lot easier when he had something to hide his face. When he stepped into the chamber

he found, with relief, that only two guards were posted outside the ship. He considered using the Force to flash static over the security camera as he'd done before but decided against it. He'd need all his concentration to get aboard.

Vitor marched confidently up to the guards. The landing ramp had been pulled up, but the Force could help him there too. First he needed to assuage the two white-armored troopers. If an alert had been sent regarding a lone stormie in cortosis armor, these ones didn't seem to have gotten it.

"Can we help you, soldier?" one of the troopers asked.

"Yes. There's something that got left aboard that should have been taken to the admiral. I've been sent to retrieve it."

"What's your unit?" asked the other.

"I'm here on special business for Admiral Grave. It's best not to keep him waiting." He used the Force to accent a severe tone. The guard on the left nodded agreement but the one on the right said, "The ship's locked from the inside. We don't have to access ourselves."

"Don't worry," said Vitor, "The admiral gave me the passcode."

Vitor tapped the control panel on his left wrist like he was sending a signal, but he reached out with the Force, through the ship's hull, and found the landing ramp extension controls he recalled from his escape. The ramp was only locked from the outside, and the press of a button was enough to lower it.

The guards stepped aside, apparently satisfied. "It may take time to find it," Vitor added before marching in. "I'll let you know if I need help."

They nodded and let him pass between. Vitor considered; memory-wipes were invasive and manipulative, and many Jedi counted them as too close to the Dark Side. Imperial Knights weren't Jedi but his mother made sure they stayed as close to the Light as possibly while serving the Empire.

It was a gray zone, and right now Vitor was willing to dabble in questionable methods. As he stepped between and past them, he reached out and put the fingertips of either hand on the backs of their necks. He felt them stiffen in alarm but sent soothing thoughts

into their minds. He looked inside them, saw the last minute's conversation, and gently brushed it away.

Then he hurried up into the ship, closed the ramp behind him, and prayed that had worked. If not, he didn't have much time before they sounded the alarm.

He hurried back to the cockpit and fired up the computer. He couldn't find any map of the asteroid field and instead started checking the ship's secondary comm systems to see if it was programmed to broadcast any signals.

That got it. There was only one signal set to be broadcast in a constant loop. It had to be meant for the turrets' IFF receivers. Vitor copied the file and prepared a message for his father, using the same memorized encryption code he'd used before. He activated the shuttle's comm systems while keeping the rest of its power offline and sent the message with the tap of a button. Two seconds later a green notice flashed on his console: Message Received.

And that was it. He'd done everything he could. Trying to fire up this ship and run for it wasn't an option; *Nemesis* or another ship would shoot him down, then recapture him. There was less risk in staying. He knew deep down he wouldn't die here. That awful vision's upside was so clear and right now he was grateful for it.

All that was left was to stay where he was and wait for his father's fleet to come for him.

"Your Majesty," Captain Yorus said, "There's something you need to see."

Davek turned from the tactical display and followed Yorus to the *Jagged Fel's* comm station. The console was alight with a transmission received. The data was encrypted using the same classified code that had alerted them to this location. Vitor was alive, he was all right, and he was trying to make contact. Davek barely restrained a sigh of relief.

Yorus and the comm ensign stepped aside so their emperor could enter the decryption key himself. When the message content appeared his first feeling was disappointment. There was no personal message from Vitor, not even coordinates to his exact



location. All the message contained was a chain of code that looked programmed to repeat in a loop.

"May we see the message contents, Your Majesty?" Yorus asked, seeing his confusion.

"Of course." Davek stepped aside.

Yorus and the ensign looked down at the message and, after a flash of consternation, the young woman's eyes face up.

"Your Majesty, I... I believe I know what this is," the ensign said.

"Go ahead."

"I *believe* this is a signal meant for IFF receivers. You Majesty, where did this come from?"

His son, a miracle-worker. "We have an agent aboard *Nemesis*. Can we set our ships to broadcast this same signal?"

"We have the same hardware as them, Your Majesty. Better. It should work for all our ships."

"Then can you patch me a direct line to Knight One?"

The ensign nodded. "Yes, at once."

Davek and Yorus hovered over the woman's shoulders as she anxiously keyed in a transmission to Marasiah's TIE Saber. Davek had no idea what his wife's situation was or what he'd be interrupting, but she responded quickly.

"This is Knight One," she said.

"This is the *Jagged Fel*," Davek said. "We've just received a new transmission from our agent aboard *Nemesis*." He gave that a half-second to sink in, then said, "We're relaying the sent data now. We believe this code is a friendly identifier meant for passive broadcast."

Marasiah took that meaning too. The ensign forwarded Vitor's code, and after three drawn-out seconds Marasiah reported, "I'm transmitting now, sir."

"Relay it to all your pilots. Are you near an active turret emplacement?"

"Close enough. Stand by. We'll test the signal."

Marasiah closed the link so she could concentrate on her duty. Davek stayed at the comm station, tense, waiting for her reply.

Initial attempts to fight their way through the asteroid belt's many deathtraps had been costly. Even Marasiah's Imperial Knights, who'd penetrated deeper than any other fighter squadron, had lost two ships to turrets and two more to enemy TIEs.

And then her voice came back. "That code is confirmed effective. Repeat, confirmed effective. We got close to a turret and destroyed it without any reaction."

"Excellent. Continue forward, Knight One."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The line clicked off. Davek told the ensign, "Every ship in the fleet needs to start broadcasting this signal. Send a copy to every capital ship immediately, with explanation. They'll send it down to their fighters. And tell all captains to prepare for full assault on the asteroid belt."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Davek stepped away to look at the tactical map and Yorus followed. There was no telling how the Restorationists would react when they realized the enemy could slip past their defenses. They might take control of the emplacements directly, or they might do something to block out the identifier signal Davek's fleet was about to hijack. The battle was far from won, but this was undoubtedly progress.

Some new lights came up on the edge of the tactical screen. Their white sigils quickly turned blue and Captain Yorus said, "Ah. This Chiss have finally arrived."

The emperor allowed a small smile. His cousin's timing was excellent.

Without warning the Imperial fleet began to fall toward them from all sides, like a constricting net. As the first capital ships blasted paths into the dense asteroid belt none of the automated turrets or mines reacted to stop them, and it became clear Davek Fel had found some to pass through.

The reaction on *Nemesis'* bridge was better than Kroan expected. The crew was shocked and aghast, but Grave took with all in stony acceptance. His mind whirled to come up with a counter-

move. Veers, meanwhile, laughed out loud and took another swig from his flask.

"That damned infiltrator must have sent them something," the ex-moff said. "Captain Fenrec! Why can't your people find one bloody saboteur?"

"I, ah, don't know, sir. Our search teams are still scouring the ship."

"Sirs?" the comm lieutenant said meekly. "No encrypted message was sent from *Nemesis* within the past fifteen minutes."

"You're certain?" asked Kroan.

"Yes, ah, sir." Nobody knew how to address him, not that he cared. "Absolutely nothing."

There were other options, Kroan thought. He might have sneaked aboard another ship and sent a signal from there. Fel's people may have figured out a way to jam or confuse the turret's IFF receivers on their own. The infiltrator might also have found a way to send a signal without raising flags on the bridge. Any infiltrator had to be resourceful, especially if they were an Imperial Knight.

Grave cared less about what had happened and more about how to counter it. The admiral hurried over to the tactical station and began snapping out a series of orders. His officers reported that the mines and turrets were still exchange signals with *Nemesis*; they were just unable to locate any hostile ships nearby.

Grave took that as encouragement. He gave a new set of orders, commanding his gunnery staff to take remote control of the mines and manually detonate them when they'd do the most damage. Kroan watched as the crew snapped into action. Within minutes the first report came in: a mine had been triggered right next to an unsuspecting enemy frigate, dealing heavy damage.

It was a start, but it would only slow Davek Fel's approach, not stop him. Kroan turned his attention to the elusive infiltrator. They were almost surely a Knight; few vermin could be so effective. They may have found a way to use *Nemesis*' comm systems without alerting the bridge, or they may have sent the code from another ship.

Including one of the many craft sitting in this super star destroyer's hangar bays.

Kroan stepped up behind Grave and pulled the man by the shoulder. The admiral spun away from the tactical station with eyes were full of anger.

"How *dare* you interrupt me now?" Grave snapped.

Kroan decided to forgive him his tone; he was stressed and didn't understand the man he was talking to. "Admiral, do you know *how* that infiltrator goat aboard?"

Grave blinked. "No. Nothing certain."

"You *suspect* something, don't you? Just tell me. I'm trying to help."

He gave a jerky nod. "One ship arrived shortly after yours. It's possible the intruder was a stow-away."

"Where is this ship?"

Grave's eye twitched. "Auxiliary hangar 3-C. I placed it under guard. The infiltrator isn't there."

Guards would stop vermin, but they wouldn't do much against a Force-user. "Thank you, Admiral. That's all I need."

Kroan found the internal security station at the rear of the bridge and bent over over a focused and intimidated ensign. "Contact the troopers stationed in hangar 3-C. Ask them if they'd have any visitors in the past two hours."

"Um, yes." The young man didn't think to add *sir*. After a short conversation over his headset he looked up at Kroan and said, "They report no visitors at all."

"Does that hangar have security cameras?"

"Of course."

"Bring them up. Now."

"I, ah...."

The young man was more terrified than stupid. "*Do* it," Kroan said, and added a command in the Force.

The ensign brought up an image on his screen and began rewinding at four times standard speed. Kroan watched two stormtroopers standing in the shadow of a small civilian-model freighter. Their figures hung in place, still except for small twitches,

until the recording showed the freighter's access ramp suddenly lowered.

"Play back, normal speed," Kroan ordered.

The ensign complied. When the recording started rolling forward there was a third trooper standing in front of the other two. This one wore bulkier cortosis armor. The closed ramp opened, seemingly on its own, and as the third trooper walked past he reached back with either hand, paused with fingers against the back of the others' troopers' necks, then continued up and closed the door behind him.

"Found something useful?" Veers said behind him.

It made Kroan and the ensign both jump. The Sith Lord spun to face Veers and said, "Do people still follow your orders, or are you completely useless?"

Veers looked mildly annoyed instead of offended. "Tell me what you need."

"A squadron of cortosis-armored troopers, under my command."

Veers raised an eyebrow, begging more.

Kroan sighed, "Please."

"I think," said Veers, "That can be arranged."

The troopers would help, but Kroan planned to handle the infiltrator himself. Vermin were fit to handle vermin but only Force-users could handle other Force-users. It was the way it had always been, and always would be.

From the inside of the cockpit Vitor could see the arrival of a full dozen stormtroopers, all in bronze-tinted cortosis armor. They'd found him and come for him but still he didn't panic. He knew his Force-vision would come true and knew it wouldn't happen here. That glimpse of his death had become an antidote to fear.

When the last figure stepped inside the hangar his confidence faltered. The tall, broad-shouldered man walked in swirl of black robes. Scars darkened his bald head. As he approached the freighter he lifted his head and looked straight at Vitor's position, as though he could see him through the cockpit's reflective transparisteel.

And, just once but very firmly, the man's reached out to Vitor in the Force and touched him.

Vitor was barely out of the cockpit when he heard the landing ramp strain open. He couldn't go out that way and he couldn't stay inside. He ran to the back chamber, where a few empty cargo-crates still lay, and climbed on a stacked pair. He ignited both white-bladed lightsabers, prayed he wasn't about to hit something explosive, and stabbed them into the ceiling. Two half-circle arcs burned a sufficient hole and he used the Force to lower the cut-out disc to the floor.

A few more cuts got him through another layer, and as a storm of boots pounded up the entrance ramp he used the Force to shove himself through the hole, all the way up and out. He rolled onto the freighter's roof and staggered upright, both sabers still sizzling in his hands.

He heard a third humming sound behind him, spun, and raised both weapons in time to catch a red lightsaber's vertical strike. Three blades sizzled together and the black-robed man- the Sith- pressed down on him hard.

Vitor pushed back, then sidestepped. He lashed out with his right saber but the Sith stepped away. Vitor kept his eyes on the Sith and took two steps back. His right foot landed on the rim of the hole he'd cut and he nearly lost balance.

The Sith didn't strike him. Vitor realized why; he was still wearing the cortosis armor he'd stolen. He'd taken off the helmet but the rest of the bronze armor was still there, not just protecting him but *scaring* his opponent. Even if he could slip his red blade past Vitor's white ones, anything but the most precise blow would short out his lightsaber and leave him helpless.

Vitor felt giddy confidence come back, stronger than ever. "You think you can kill me? I'd like to see you try."

The Sith lowered his lightsaber and gaze Vitor a stare full of resentment. Then he took one hand off his weapon, raised it, and released a blast of Force lightning. Vitor raised both sabers, crossed them, and caught most of the blast, though painful energy still

sizzled across his face. He held them there, straining against the release. It felt like he was trying to hold back a storm.

Then the attack stopped. The Sith lowered his hand to grip his saber again. Vitor hefted both weapons for an attack, took the first step forward-

-then fell and kept falling, and his body refused to move. His face slammed painfully into the ship's hard hull, and then there was no pain and nothing else either.

Darth Kroan looked at the body sprawled face-down in front of him and shut off his lightsaber. He looked past the prone form to the stormtrooper who'd climbed onto the ship's back unnoticed and popped a single well-placed stun shot into the back of the man's neck.

"Very good," Kroan said. He walked up to the body and used his foot to roll it onto its back so the face could be seen. Happy with confirmation, Kroan looked up from the Prince of the Empire and said, "Contact the bridge. Tell your leaders I have a prize better than they could have ever hoped for."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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With everything else that was happening right now, the inside of *Starlight Champion* should have been Arlen's last reliable refuge. Instead he sat tense in the cockpit and stared at Chance Calrissian's hovering blue holo-image in disbelief.

"What do you mean she wouldn't explain?"

"I mean she wouldn't explain." Chance shrugged. "And yes, I tried. She said she'll be a couple days late to Ossus."

"How did she seem?"

"She insisted that I shouldn't worry about her."

That was the last thing Arlen wanted to hear. He slumped in his seat and wondered whether it would be worth it to try and hail Tamar. If she and Marin were going off on Mando business together she probably wouldn't respond.

"She's a Jedi. I'm sure she'll be okay, especially if she's with Tamar's family," Chance said. He almost sounded like he believed it.

"I just hate it when she goes off like this," Arlen sighed.

"Well she's a grown-up now. You've gotta let her make choices *and* mistakes."

"Thank you for the original parenting advice."



Chance ignored the sarcasm. "You're welcome. By the way, when can we get our hands on that bit of Soergg's collection you stole?"

"I didn't steal it. Some Imperial Knights did. Anyway, I've got it in the Temple. You can send a courier or someone to pick it up. Where are you now?"

"Inbound for the Core with Volgma."

"And is Volgma a happy Hutt?"

"He will be once we fence that Alderaanian vase and get compensation."

"I thought Volgma was averse to sub-legal business deals. And you, for that matter."

"I am, normally, but this is an exceptional case."

"Well, that works nicely."

"Arlen, don't go piously righteous on me. You helped steal the damned thing."

"Yeah, I know." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Righteousness was a hard thing to contemplate when you were pondering a pact with a Sith locked in your basement. "Anyway, how did Vedo make out in this? And did Soergg get his droid back?"

"He did. Vedo's slicer got only a partial data-dump from the droid but he still seems satisfied. He's humiliated Soergg and all the other Hutts know it."

"He must be bloated with pride."

"Among other things. Vedo also wanted me to repeat his gratitude and says he wouldn't mind working with Jedi again."

"That was a one-time thing."

"I thought so, but I left the door open anyway." Chance gave a short, satisfied sigh. "I know it's your father's prerogative to worry about Marin, but I'm sure you don't have to. She'll be okay."

"Yeah. I'm sure she will." Arlen faked a smile.

Since there seemed nothing more to say, Chance sketched a quick salute. "Talk to you later, friend."

"Later," Arlen said, and shut off the transmission.

He sunk into his chair, pressed down by worries. It wasn't just questionable ethics, or Marin gone missing, or the great and distant battle his brother was embroiled in. The heaviest thing of all was that Sith in the basement.

He eventually forced himself from his chair, left *Champion*, and made his way into the lowest levels of the Jedi Temple. He hadn't gone to see the prisoner yet, but Arlen knew where he was being kept. He traced a path down narrow stone hallways until he found the door. A pair of young Jedi guarded it on either side and they stiffened to attention when they saw Arlen come.

"Master Fel!" the one on the right snapped. "Have you come to talk to the prisoner?"

"That's right. Is anyone else with him?"

"No, Master Fel."

Arlen took a deep breath. "Then let me through."

They unlocked the door, then closed it once Arlen stepped through. He found himself looking down on a middle-aged Chiss lying flat on his bench. Stun cuffs bound his ankles and pinned his wrists in front of him. A metal cast encased the lower half of one leg. He seemed to have been sleeping, but when Arlen stood over him his red eyes opened easily and stared upward. Arlen flinched just a little as he looked down on his first apprentice; or rather, what was left of him. When he'd thought Wharn dead in Senex-Juvex he'd gone through stages of regret and grief. When he'd learned the Chiss had been captured and turned by the Sith years later, he'd repeated those stages again, more acutely than the first time. Now they'd come back for a third round.

The Sith didn't sit upright. He just kept laying there, looking up at Arlen, until the Jedi said, "I never thought I'd see you again."

"It's mutual," said Terrid.

All the youthful softness on Wharn had been carved away. Terrid's face was gaunt and angular. His lips were a thin joyless line and his eyes were settled harsh over hard cheekbones.

"When Jade told me you were alive, I didn't know what to think. I just wish... it could have been different. If I'd been a little

faster back in those tunnels, if I'd have taken out Darth Kheykid before he took you... It could have been different."

"Is that what you came here to say?" asked Terrid, unimpressed.

"I'm not sure exactly," Arlen admitted. He'd avoided seeing the prisoner for days, but if his word was going to decide the future of the Jedi, Arlen knew he couldn't hide forever. "I understand you've been very helpful."

"I tried to oust Darth Krayt's Sith. Perhaps you'll succeed where I failed."

"So you want to make the Jedi an instrument of your revenge?"

Terrid gave a lying-down shrug. It sickened Arlen to think of Jedi fulfilling this renegade Sith's wish, but he'd given them information they couldn't ignore. Some good might come from Terrid's selfishness; from Wharn's fall.

"Can I ask you something personal?"

Terrid shrugged again. "You can *ask*."

"When the Sith took you... broke you... How much did you resist?"

"Did your teaching matter? Is that what you're asking?"

"I guess I am."

The Sith's head rolled to one side. He stared into the wall, thought, and said, "I struggled. And the things my Jedi teacher taught me were... useful, for a while. But the Sith don't relent. That's why they always win."

Arlen didn't know what he'd expected. That didn't assuage guilt or grief but didn't exacerbate them either. He had one more aching question and decide to be out with it. "Are you a Sith, still?"

Terrid continued to stare into the wall. Arlen let him think, and eventually he said, "What else would I be?"

Arlen didn't have an answer, so he quietly left the room. As the door locked behind him, he walked away quickly, without looking back.

It had been eight years since Roan Fel last visited the Jedi Temple on Ossus and he was willing to admit that time and experience may have clouded his memories. He'd remembered it more as some

monastic hideaway, suitable for meditation and contemplation, full of wandering brown-robed Masters who never seemed to actually *do* anything.

His mother always insisted that the Imperial Knights were not rivals or enemies to the Jedi Order but comrades. Those of Roan's generation had never really believed it. Imperial Knights served their Empire and fought and died for it. Though just seventeen, Roan had known too many Knights now killed in the Empire's service. The Jedi, by contrast, swore allegiance no power except a lofty abstraction. He knew most Jedi were probably true and noble enough, but in his view they'd never been tested as hard as his fellow Imperial Knights. They weren't as disciplined, weren't as hard. They'd accomplished less.

He was starting to realize that, while these Jedi didn't keep martial order like the Knights, they had discipline of their own. They weren't soft.

Three Imperial Knights versus one Jedi apprentice had seemed an unfair matchup, even for a sparring match, but Nat Skywalker had seemed game. Roan's cousin was a year and a half younger but already bigger. He'd balled his long blonde hair up before starting and after just ten minutes his whole face was slick with sweat, but he still kept at it. Treis and Roan mostly hung to the sides, taking occasional jabs at the Jedi's flanks, while Mohrgan attacked from the front. The Jedi healers had mended his wounds expertly and his motions were fast and nimble, but Roan could tell he was slightly uncomfortable with the blue-bladed lightsaber he'd been loaned to practice.

The first match ended with Treis slipping his white blade beneath Nat's defenses, nearly poking his stomach. The young Skywalker took the defeat with a red-faced grin and suggested that, for the next match, they fight blue sabers versus white. Two on two would be more fair, after all.

Mohrgan was fine with that. Roan was happy to keep fighting, because he needed something to keep his mind off whatever was happening with Vitor and his parents. It maddened all three young

Knights to be kept away like this and they needed an outlet for frustration.

Just as they were starting to spar, an audience joined them in the practice room. Elliah Chalk and her brother Hogrum took spots on the bench next to the sparring mats and started watching without a word. Those two had been wandering the Jedi Temple like the three Knights, lost but less impatient. Normally Roan didn't mind having her around but he found himself wishing she'd leave.

Elliah was the first Hapan he'd met. They'd always said Hapan women were beautiful and they'd been right, but he tried to keep his mind off her and on the match. While Treis sparred with Mohrgan, Roan tried to match Nat. The Skywalker boy had recovered well; his feet were nimble on the mat and he dodged Roan's attacks as often as he blocked them. Being matched so well made Roan frustrated, all the more because the audience, which made his moves all the more sloppy, and it ended when he overbalanced and let Nat get beneath his defenses.

Treis, at least, had bested Mohrgan, so it ended a draw. As the four of them took a break for water, Elliah asked, "Why do you Jedi insist on using lightsabers? Why don't you train with ranged weapons? It would be more practical."

She was full of questions like that. She was ignorant of the wider galaxy like no one he'd ever met, but her curiosity was strangely refreshing.

"Jedi aren't soldiers," Nat told her. "A lightsaber is a defensive weapon, first and foremost. If you get close enough to attack someone you have to look them in the eye."

"So it's a question of honor."

"You could say that."

"Jedi follow antique codes and customs. I've gathered that." Elliah looked to Roan. "What about Imperial Knights? You *are* soldiers, aren't you?"

"Yes, but that's not *all* we are. We've been trained to use blasters and explosives too, but our primary weapon is still the lightsaber."

"Because it's honorable?"

"Basically, yes."

She hummed thoughtfully. "On Hapes it was common for daughters of noble families to learn to fight with pikes. It was a way of honoring tradition."

"Did you learn how to fight with one?" asked Mohrgan.

"Some. I remember that Queen Serissa was supposed to be very good with one."

"Yeah, I bet she'd got a lot of talents," grunted Treis.

An awkward silence filled the room. Talk about Hapes drew thoughts to the big battle they'd all narrowly escaped. That in turn drew thoughts back to Ossus; what they were doing here and what was keeping all the seniors Masters busy.

Hogrum was young or bold enough to ask Nat, "Do *you* know who the prisoner is?"

"Why would *I* know?" asked Skywalker.

"Your mother captured the prison.... Didn't she?"

Nat looked at the floor with a frown, like someone who knew some things but not everything and was deciding how much to tell. Elliah asked, "Is it a Sith?"

"What do you know about Sith?" asked Treis.

"Only a little. Only what Jade- Master Skywalker- told me. She says they're like Jedi and Imperial Knights but opposite to them both."

"That's a start," admitted Nat.

"So if the Sith are involved, does that mean you're on the same side?"

She was good at those innocent but heavy questions. All four young men passed awkward looks. Treis said, "My father was killed by a Sith."

"I'm sorry," Elliah said. "I saw what they could do at Reboam. It was terrifying."

Beside her, Hogrum scowled at the memory.

"The Sith and Jedi have battled for centuries," Roan explained. "As for *us*... We know the Sith were involved with the Restorationists at the beginning. That's how Treis' father got killed. But we haven't seen any of them since. And believe me, we've looked very hard."

"But they're still your enemies, aren't they?"

"Absolutely," said Treis.

Treis said what he believed, but as a prince Roan knew it was more complicated. These Jedi here on Ossus saw the Sith as their ultimate foe; for the Empire, it was the Restorationists. If these Jedi did have a captive Sith locked up, and his capture was leading to a greater confrontation between Sith and Jedi, he had no idea how his parents would respond. A lot might depend on the outcome of the battle against the Restorationists happening right now.

"Hapans tell a lot of stories about Jedi," Elliah said. "I see now that they're pretty much all lies. I already suspected that before. But these Sith.... They're worse than the worst Jedi stories I ever heard."

"The Sith are allied with Queen Serissa," Nat said. "Your cousin."

"Serissa's no cousin of mine," she shook her head stubbornly.

Nat looked down at the lightsaber he'd clipped to his belt. "The prisoner is a Sith. My mom told me that much, but not anything else."

"Do you think he's... telling them things? About Hapes?" Hogrum asked like he was afraid of the answer.

"He's telling them *something*, if they've been locked up with him for days," Treis said.

"There's no point in guessing what," Roan told them. "We'll just have to wait and see."

Treis and Mohrgan nodded grimly. 'Wait and see' was the summary of their days now. Roan didn't know what would come of this captured Sith, but its prospects frightened him as much as his family's distant battle.

Allana had left Coruscant uncertain when, if ever, she'd return to the capital. She stopped briefly on New Hapes to pick up Tanith Zel, then headed for Ossus. Jade hadn't been willing to explain much on an open comm channel, but that she'd requested both of them in person meant something major had happened.

When Allana and Tanith sat down in the Jedi Temple to hear the full story, they could hardly believe it. Tanith was nakedly incredulous.

"The ancient Hapans scoured Force-users from their bloodlines," she said. "That the Force should manifest in a *queen* is.... Unbelievable. Are you sure that Sith isn't lying to you?"

"Very," Jade said. "It's not just Serissa who has the Force. The Chalk siblings, her distant cousins, have it too. We can only assume it was passed unnoticed by some ancestor."

"A Sith Lord, ruling the Hapes Cluster..." K'Kruhk shook his shaggy head. "It's the most power their kind has had since the days of Palpatine."

Allana knew the ancient Whiphid remembered those days all too well. "This is different," she said. "Hapes isn't the old Empire. It's so much smaller and their power is still limited."

"Limited, but greater than anything the Jedi can wield," Tanith said pointedly. "Serissa commands an entire fleet of battle-trained, devoted soldiers. You've just told us the Alliance won't help us."

Allana sighed. "The politics is.... complicated."

"Help us with what?" Jade asked. "Do we, the Jedi Order, want to overthrow the Queen of Hapes?"

"We always suspected there were Sith there," K'Kruhk said. "We knew nothing about them, and so they've festered for forty years, starting wars in Senex-Juvex and the Empire. The damage they've caused is... incalculable."

"We weren't ignorant for lack of trying," Tanith said defensively. "The Sith hid themselves exceptionally well. The fact that we only heard about them now is—"

A gift, Lowbacca trilled.

"The Grand Master is right," Allana sighed, then added for Tanith, who didn't understand Shyriiwook, "The information Darth Terriid's given us is invaluable. We can't just waste it."

"Then what are we talking about?" Jade looked directly at her cousin. "What *exactly*?"

Allana felt all their eyes draw to her. Tanith's were hard; she already knew the answer. Allana took a breath and said, "I can't



allow a legion of Sith Lords to ravage the Hapes Cluster. Not as a Jedi, not as its rightful queen. We have to remove them, both from Hapes itself and Shedú Maad."

Allana watched their responses. Tanith gave a tiny, firm nod. K'Kruhk's eyes narrowed, as though he were contemplating the problems ahead. Lowbacca was too hard to read, but on Jade's face Allana saw a raw dread.

"You're saying the Jedi Order should overthrow the leader of Hapes," Jade said. "I just want to be clear on that."

"The leader of Hapes is a Sith tyrant. Her fleets protect even worse monsters," Tanith said darkly. "We have to destroy them."

"The difficulty lies in *how*," said K'Kruhk. "You say we can't count on the Alliance to liberate Hapes."

"Coruscant is a mess right now because they lost a lot of soldiers in one engagement," Allana said. "They're not going to launch a full-scale invasion of a sovereign kingdom."

"Exactly," said Jade. "If the whole Alliance is afraid to do something like that, what can *we* do?"

"New Hapes will help any way it can," Tanith said. "Though I admit we have limited resources."

Lowbacca growled that they would have to explore other options, including sneaking precise and lethal strike forces onto Shedú Maad and Hapes.

"Assassination teams?" Jade asked.

"Call it what you will. It could be possible," Tanith mused, "But we have no way of predicting what will happen to Hapes if we take out Serissa."

"It can hardly be worse than a genocidal Sith tyrant," said Allana. "The Grand Master is right. We must do whatever we can, even if our capabilities are limited. What these Sith have done so far is monstrous. If what our prisoner says is true, and Darth Krayt is still sleeping on Shedú Maad, it will become so much worse when he wakes."

Jade looked down at her hands, took a breath, and asked the question Allana knew was the real source of her hesitation. "What do we do with Darth Terrid?"

The question hung there for a drawn-out moment. It was Tanith who asked, "Do you think, if we took him back to Shedua Maad, he'd switch sides again?"

"I don't think Krayt's people would take him back if he tried. But that's not to say I trust him."

Lowbacca reminded them that Terrid was the only one of them who'd been to Shedua Maad in forty years. The descriptions he'd given had been helpful. His guidance might be invaluable.

Jade shook her head. "Relying on his information is one thing, but actually taking him with us..."

"It is a huge risk," K'Kruhk said. "But it might also yield great rewards. Tell me, Master Skywalker, what do you believe Terrid would do if he joined us at Shedua Maad?"

They all knew the bond Jade had once shared with a young Chiss apprentice. Whether it made Jade a better or worse judge of Darth Terrid, Allana wasn't sure. Clearly, neither was Jade.

"I don't know," she said weakly.

Lowbacca suggested that another talk with the Sith Lord was in order.

Jade breathed deeply, in then out. Her dread of sitting down with another conversation with Terrid was palpable to them all. The need for it was clear too.

"I'll go," Jade said softly. "I'll talk to him again. After that... I'll decide."

It seemed as though Terrid hadn't moved an inch since their last conversation. Even the bacta cast was still on his leg. Once Jade stepped into the cell she sat down on the cot opposite his. Unlike last time, she didn't shrink from the red glow of his eyes. She couldn't afford to. Hard as it was, she needed to know the truth.

"You've come back," Terrid said flatly. "Are you going to explain why?"

"The Jedi have taken their time considering what you've said. And how they'll respond."

"What's to consider? Call on your friends in the Alliance. Muster a fleet. Bomb Shedú Maad to ash and conquer Hapes. Don't leave a single Sith alive."

As he spoke she could tell he wanted it. He'd been left here for days and his spite had only deepened. The idea of enacting some revenge on those who'd beaten him was his only remaining desire. She didn't know if that was encouraging, only that it was sad.

"That's not a possibility," Jade said. "We don't have the resources."

He arched a black brow. "No help from the Alliance? That's what you get from staying separate from the government. If the Jedi Order hadn't fled to Ossus you could have stayed on Coruscant and *forced* the Alliance to do what's needed."

"That's not the Jedi way. We're not made to rule."

"Then you turn your back on the greatest gift the Force can offer."

"The Force can do much more than subjugate people to your will. If that's all you know how to use it for, then I'm sorry for you."

She knew pity would hurt him. His face twisted in a scowl. "I'm not going to debate what the Force is *for*. The Force simply *is* and those who can use it, do. So if you don't have the Alliance at your back, who can you call on?"

"Only ourselves. So tell me honestly. How many Sith are there in Hapan Space, all combined?"

"Define Sith. There are acolytes on Shedú Maad. Teenage apprentices. Small children trained in the Dark Side as soon as they can walk. What would you do with them?"

Jade hadn't even considered that. "We'd try to redeem those who could be saved. We're not butchers."

"And if those small children grab lightsabers and try to kill you, what then?"

"We'd defend ourselves and disarm them. I'll say it another way. How many Sith are there capable of putting up a fight on Shedú Maad?"

He only had to think for a moment. "Less than one hundred."

"And how many on Hapes besides the queen?"

"Normally, none. I can't say how it's changed since... the battle."

"And how many Sith on *other* planets in the Hapes Cluster?"

"None that I know of."

He was telling the truth. The answers all came out easily. Despite his bitterness and occasional desire to parry with her, Terrid wanted the destruction of the One Sith. She was certain of that.

He leaned forward, elbows on knees. "You Jedi have enough to defeat them. It will be bloody, but if you throw the entire Order at them, numbers and attrition will be on your side."

"You're forgetting the Hapan navy."

"Send your Jedi to Hapes and Sheddu Maad. Kill every Sith you find. Blast Darth Krayt's sleeping chamber to atoms. And when you're done the Hapans will blast *you* to atoms. But at least the Sith will be gone."

"Would that please you? Seeing us all annihilated?" Because she had to know, she hunched forward too and looked into his red eyes. "Do you want to see *me* dead?"

He flinched. His face tilted away. "There's no reason I should."

"But you want to see the One Sith dead more."

"You know I do." He looked back to her. "I will come to Sheddu Maad with you. Is that what you came here to ask?"

"Yes. But you don't decide if you come or not."

"I know. The Jedi decide. But you'll let me come. You *need* me. I can guide you exactly where to go in Sheddu Maad."

"They may have changed things since they got rid of you."

"Not everything. Not the chamber where Krayt sleeps. I will show it to you, Jade. We'll go there together."

"Why do you think I'm going there to kill Krayt?"

"Because," he said, utterly serious, "You're a Skywalker."

She scowled. "Is a *Sith* going to lecture me about destiny now?"

"I don't need to lecture you about anything. You know the power passed down to you. You know what you're capable of, even if you don't want to be."

"You're going to tell me what I *want* now too?"

"You don't want to be Grand Master like your father. You don't want to die young like your parents or your husband. You want to grow old and be happy and raise your sons to be great Jedi themselves. You want a life of *peace*."

He was right. She hated that she was so transparent to him when they'd only met a few times in their adult lives. But maybe he wasn't just describing the woman in front of him. Maybe the Jade he described was, at the core, the same Jade he'd known a quarter century ago.

Maybe all the transformations Terrid had gone through made him better at spotting what remained constant in her.

"I can't deny it," she said. "There's nothing wrong with it either. I'll never want to command armies and burn planets."

"You want peace, but destiny finds you," Terrid insisted. "And when the need comes, you rise to the cause. You summon that great Skywalker strength and you *use* it. You killed Darth Xoran. You destroyed Abeloth forever. Don't lie to me. I was there and I felt that incredible power come out of you. We destroyed Abeloth together and together we'll kill Krayt."

"Jodram killed Abeloth."

"Because you gave him power. *Your* power. We both know Jodram was too weak a Jedi—"

"Don't you *dare* call him weak," she snapped. "You could never accomplish what he did. It required strength like you'll never know. Not raw Force power, strength of the *heart*."

He looked down. She felt something from him she hadn't expected: contrition. "Maybe so," he muttered. "I am what I am. What the One Sith made me."

"You could have been something more."

"These are the only lives we'll have. Regrets get us nowhere." He still didn't look up. "Destiny finds you, Jade. Always. That's what being a Skywalker means. It also means rising to the occasion. You'll do that too."

He said it with plain, simple certainty. She wanted to rebut him but could not. Destiny had found her again. She was sitting across the room from it, looking at its bowed head, and whether she

wanted it or not, destiny would carry them together, out of this cell, across the stars, to Shedu Maad and the den of a sleeping dragon.

She knew that, because all he'd said was true.

When Kol Skywalker and Nei Rin got the chance to explain their troubling discoveries, they gathered Jaina, Tahiri, and the Master Shaper in the Yuuzhan Vong laboratory. Kol let his friend do most of the talking, and as they watched and listened what began as skepticism in the three adults' eyes became deep concern. The moment Nei Rin finished her explanation, Neshri Yim requested to see the data they'd copied from Rennis' pad.

The Master Shaper was normally loath to work off a lifeless machine, but he surprised Kol by taking the datacard and pad he was offered. He studied the screen intently as Jaina and Tahiri watched over his shoulder. Best Kol knew, his great-aunt was no expert on xenobiology but Tahiri seemed to have a little knowledge. As she read Kol could feel her dread mount in the Force.

"This is most alarming," Neshri Yim said at last.

"Could there be another explanation for this?" asked Jaina. "Something to do with the project?"

The Master Shaper shook his head. "All this data on our biots was assembled from different sources we gave him. And the specifications for all these unique toxins... he must have brought them with him."

"Are all the scientists in their laboratory now?"

"They should be," Tahiri said. "Do you want to talk to Rennis alone?"

"We should talk to all of them." Neshri Yim was firm. "There is no telling who else is involved. You *Jeedai* can sense if they are telling truth, yes?"

After a tiny hesitation, Jaina nodded. "We'll come with you. Kol, Nei Rin, thank you for bringing this to our attention. We'll handle the rest from here."

Kol started, "But I—"

"Stay *here*," Jaina insisted and turned for the door. Tahiri followed and then Neshri Yim, and then Kol and Nei Rin were alone.

The girl put a hand on his arm and said, "They are correct. This could... become dangerous."

"It already is dangerous."

"You know what I mean. You are brave, Kol Skywalker, but you are not a *Jeedai* yet."

As they gathered the five members of the Alliance science team in the laboratory, Jaina couldn't help but wonder if this was her fault. She and Tahiri had researched these scientists before allowing them on Zonama Sekot. They'd scoured their histories for any hint of sympathy to the various anti-Yuuzhan Vong extremist groups still out there and found nothing, but she also knew they'd vetted the two senior researchers, Soett and Tlaa, more thoroughly than their assistants. From what Jaina could recall, the young man named Rennis was from Denon, a world that had avoided invasion seventy-five years back, but he may have gained extremist ties another way.

This incident could ruin cooperation with the Alliance for decades to come, and if there *was* some hint Jaina had missed, she would never forgive herself. In her waning years she'd tried harder than ever to heal the wounds of the war that had damaged her own life so much; it would be intolerable irony if she only caused deeper cuts.

Two younger and more able-bodied Jedi joined Tahiri, Jaina, and Neshri Yim as they gathered the scientists in their lab. When everyone was sealed in the chamber, the Master Shaper got straight to the point.

"We have recently been made aware of some research here that is outside the provisions of our project. At least one of you has been researching Yuuzhan Vong biots and devising potential lethal toxins to use against them."

Jaina stepped up beside Neshri Yim and placed Kol's datapad on the center table. "This is a copy of data found on a pad belonging to Researcher Rennis."

Soett picked up the pad and looked over it quickly. Concern filled her face and she turned on the young human. "What is the meaning of this?"

He glanced at the data on the screen and frowned. "I've never seen this in my life," he said, though Jaina sensed no confusion from him in the Force.

"This information was found on your desk," Jaina told him without explaining who'd made the discovery.

Rennis' frown deepened. "That is not my pad."

"It's a copy from one of yours."

"Another pad.... On my desk..." His eyes darted to the young woman beside him. "Neita let me borrow one of her pads at the end of work yesterday. I haven't had a chance to read it."

Now it was Neita's turn to look confused, and this time Jaina could feel honesty. "I didn't give you anything yesterday."

"Of course you did," Rennis moved for the desk. "I've got it right here."

The young woman insisted to Soett, "I really don't know what he's talking about. Last night I-"

Rennis spun around from his desk with a little hold-out blaster in his fist. Soett gasped; Neita yelped with surprise. Neshri Yim hissed as the researcher pointed its stubby barrel directly at the Master Shaper's chest.

"Put that down. Now," Jaina said, with a command from the Force. She'd wrest that gun from his hand but it might go off, and he'd killed Neshri Yim at this range.

Rennis backed toward the door but kept his aim on the Yuuzhan Vong. His determination was fierce enough to withstand her Force-command.

"You can't get away," Tahiri said. "There's no place to run."

Rennis kept going until his back was almost at the door. He'd have to turn to tap the controls and open it, and Jaina would pull his gun away then.



But instead of turning he squeezed the trigger. A red blast lanced out at Neshri Yim. Jaina reached out with the Force to block it, erecting an invisible wall in front of the Yuuzhan Vong. As she did so Rennis adjusted his aim and blasted out the light overhead, spreading a shower of sparks across the table, then darkness.

And then he was through the door and out of the room. The second it closed there was the sound of another laser blast in the hallway, and when Yeris Ulara got to the door the Mirialan announced that the controls has been fried from the other side.

"Then use the Force on it!" Tahiri insisted, then told the others, "He can't go far. This is a small compound."

Neshri Yim forced his gaze from the spot a few centimeters from his heart where the killing bolt had fizzled to smoke and disappeared. He looked at Jaina and said, "Thank you, *Jedai*. You saved me."

"Not yet," she told him. "Thank us we when it's over."

When he heard the shot sound down the hall, Kol felt a surge of anxiety and frustration from Jaina and Tahiri, and he knew that something had gone severely wrong. Next, muffled through several closed doors, he heard someone shout, "The door's stuck! He blasted the controls!"

"Then use the Force on it!" someone else, maybe Tahiri, said.

Kol heard no boots pounding down the hall this way, which meant Rennis must be sprinting in the other direction. In the compound there were few places to run, and the skimmers they used for away missions wouldn't get him far. He could only be making a run for the shuttle he'd arrived on.

"Let's go!" Kol told Nei Rin and broke into a sprint.

The Yuuzhan Vong lagged behind him as he burst out of the shaper's lab. "*Jedai*! What are you doing?"

"Someone's gotta stop him!" Kol called back and kept running.

The distance to the landing pad from the scientists' lab and the shapers' one was about the same, and as much as he hated it, Rennis could move faster with longer strides than he could. He didn't even know what he'd do once he got there but he *had* to do something.

He might have been young but he was still a Jedi or becoming one fast and a Jedi didn't just sit around and do nothing. For all Kol knew the man could escape with a copy of his deadly research.

The landing pad was accessed from one central lift shaft, and Kol got there just in time to see the doors close and hear the tube shoot upward. There were still emergency stairs that spiraled up around the tube, and Kol immediately began climbing them. He made long lunges, taking two steps at a time, even though his thighs started to ache and his chest strained for breath.

When he burst onto the pad he saw the shuttle waiting and he saw Rennis' figure bent close to the hull, probably trying to figure out how to extend the landing pad. Kol's legs were about to collapse under him and when he tried to shout at the man no sound came. He planted himself on the deck, took two deep breaths, and found the strength to shout "Stop!"

Rennis jumped and spun. Kol saw the blaster in his hand right before it went off. There was a red flash, and then searing pain spread out from the center of his chest, and then Kol Skywalker knew he was falling backward. The sky filled his vision, a clear blue nothing, but when his back hit the deck he saw nothing and felt nothing at all.

The lift carried them up and opened its doors and it was already too late. Ulara rushed out first, lightsaber ignited, and bounded across the landing pad at Rennis, who stood frozen in front of the doors to a shuttle that couldn't open. His pistol twitched in his hand but the Miralian deflected the blast, then used the Force to rip the weapon away. Another shove of invisible energy forced the scientist on his hands and knees and, finally, a boot between shoulder-blades dropped his face hard into the deck.

Jaina barely noticed. She was hurrying toward Kol as fast as her old body would carry her.

The boy was lying face-up with a black scorched hole in his chest. His eyes were open, staring into nothing and seeing nothing. Jaina thought he was already dead, but when she dropped on top of him and placed her hands over his ruined chest she could still feel

his presence, so very faint. Tahiri called for a medical kit, but Jaina knew the boy's last embers would burn out in seconds.

She couldn't let it happen. Jaina fell over his body, both hands against the burnt flesh of his wound, called on the Force.

Jaina was no healer, not like Cilghal or Tekli or other great Jedi she'd known. She'd spent too many years being a Sword of the Jedi that killed for peace again and again. She healed the only way she knew how, by giving the strength that was hers so that the boy's body might mend. Just as she'd found faint life in that gnarled bora sprout she found it in Kol and she opened herself as though with a sword so what she had might flow into him. She passed it from the great to the small, the strong to the weak, the old to young, and in bridging their lives she felt Kol in the Force as she never had before.

The life inside him strengthened, grew, began the arduous process of healing its broken flesh cell-by-cell, and as her life-force suffused into his she saw brief, flashing glimpses of the man he'd become: tall and bold, red hair like his grandfather Ben's and a flashing blue sword, green eyes full of wisdom and love for his own son (blonde-haired, she saw, like Jade and Luke) and with love for the entire line of Skywalkers, of which Kol was just one link, neither beginning and nor end, just a carrier of the fire that flared anew from warming embers beneath Jaina's hands.

And as Kol's fire burned warmer, strong enough to keep burning and sustain itself and mend a young body no longer on the brink of death, Jaina felt a deep cold spread from inside. She felt cold and she felt tired, and the fire that was Kol's life seemed distant and separate again. She could no longer see the man he'd become or remember his face. She was tired, only tired.

As Jaina's fire cooled and dimmed her body lost feeling and collapsed atop the boy's. She felt like she was being carried away, peacefully, to a long and well-earned sleep.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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The enemy was coming at them from all directions like a pack of piranha-beetles, chewing ravenously through the barrier of asteroids. Each advancing star destroyer unleashed a constant pulse of turbolaser fire. The green wash of plasma pulverized space-rock and cleared a passage for the attacking ships vectoring toward *Nemesis*. Sometimes the destroyers would fail to destroy a mine on their flanks, and a few damaging explosions had knocked out entire capital ships and left them helpless against the endless drifting asteroids, but the hundreds of turbolaser emplacements seeded inside the belt simply refused to fire.

Korosh Vull didn't know how things had gone so wrong. From his point of view, it didn't matter because he orders hadn't changed. He'd been charged with stopping the enemy advance at cost of his own life, and he was doing that now, even though his Breaker Squadron had been depleted by half- four ships lost to hostile fire and two more crashed into asteroids.

For the exhausting hours-long brawl in the asteroid belt, it felt like his Breakers had been battling with the same enemy squadron on and off. They were flying TIE Sabers also, using the fighters' best

speed and agility, pulling off coordinated maneuvers as though the pilots shared one mind.

Maybe they were. Vull knew Fel sent his Jedi directly into battle. His propaganda even claimed he sent his wife and sons to the front lines. He doubted a man bold and vain enough to proclaim himself Emperor would put his heirs in danger, but Vull had known his wife Marasiah. Not as well as he'd thought, but he'd known her, and knew even with that Empress' crown the woman wouldn't run from a fight.

Vull's Breakers found their constant enemies just when their remaining five TIE Sabers breached the edge of the asteroid cluster and dove into the bubble of clear space surrounding *Nemesis* and its support ships. None of Fel's destroyers had gotten here yet but it was only a matter of time until they'd chew throw and attack from all vectors. Slowing five hostile TIEs wouldn't do much to decide this fight, but it would count for *something*, especially if those pilots really were Jedi.

Vull signaled his pilots to attack. Getting clear of the asteroids was a huge boon them but it helped their opponents too. The five Sabers knew they had enemies on their tail and broke formation. Vull dove after the ship he marked as their leader and immediately tracked it for a torpedo. When he got a target lock he was still a long range away but he let fly anyway. The fighter had plenty of room to evade but he stayed on it, spraying laserfire to box it in as it tried to juke free of the tracking torp. The TIE made a desperate run in the direction of the nearest capital ship: an old *Kontos*-class frigate. Seeing the type always reminded Vull of *Shieldbreaker* and *Voidwalker* and all that had happened there; it also reminded him that a *Kontos* had good tracking on its canons and could blast a distracted starfighter to atoms.

This fighter wasn't distracted and it wasn't slow. It bobbed, weaved, corkscrewed, and when the frigate unleashed a blast of tubolaser fire it swung to one side and jetted away. The torpedo that had been chasing it all this time ran into the wash of turbolaser bolts and exploded.

Now that the frigate had saved it, the TIE tried to pull away. Vull was there with another torpedo ready. He charged in head-on, spearing lasers against the ship's forward shields. It broke hard to avoid a collision; Vull did too, but not before releasing a single torpedo at close range. The TIE tried to evade but this warhead hit true, and the ship vanished in a satisfying burst of light.

Vull pulled clear of the explosion, checked his scanners to see how the rest of his squad was doing-

-and a chain of laserfire punched hard through his starboard shields. Alarms wailed inside his cockpit as they shredded his upper-right solar panel and he struggled to get his TIE under control. His ship went streaking toward the Kontos frigate; its angular gray hull filled his vision and he knew he was going to crash.

His mind flashed back eight full years to Yaga Minor, the only other time he'd been forced to eject. He'd been fighting Marasiah Fel and it had ended just like this: thrown into an out-of-control spin, the great gray bulk of a Golan station filling his vision.

He pulled the lever beneath his chair. The cockpit roof exploded outward and he followed. The TIE went spinning until it impacted on the frigate's shields but Vull shot straight away, strapped in his ejection seat.

He strained in his crash webbing to find the fighter that had short him down. A few TIEs soared in the distance; his or the enemy's, he couldn't tell, and it didn't rightly matter now anyway.

He was drifting in the void, getting further and further away from the frigate. The battle, so fierce a second ago, seemed shockingly far away. The enemy fleet would get here soon enough and all this empty space would light up with waves of turbolaser fire. He'd be caught in that, probably, turned to atoms in an instant, his death utterly unnoticed.

He should have spared himself the wait and never pulled that lever. He should stayed inside his ship and smashed into the shield and been done with it. It would have been quick and simple and gotten the inevitable over with; it would have given Vull what he'd deserved for stupidly trusting a Hutt and bringing an infiltrator

home with him. This conflagration was his fault; it was only fitting that he die in it. At least, he thought, the wait wouldn't be *so* much longer.

Then Vull felt the tug of a tractor beam from the frigate, kindly reeling in a lost pilot, and he knew he'd be forced to live with his shame.

Marasiah watched on her sensors as the TIE whose wing she'd clipped went spiraling into the nearby frigate, but by the time it impacted she'd turned her tail and had already soared out of range of the ship's guns. She'd shot down the pilot who'd killed Knight Three, and while it wasn't a wholly Light Side feeling, she was satisfied.

She checked her scanners and found where her three surviving Knights were located. They were the only Imperials ships to breach this bubble of open space so far, but with her eyes she could see at least two more places where friendly star destroyers were close to pushing through, including Admiral Jaeger's flagship. The Restorationists were already sending waves out to meet them, which meant they weren't paying much attention to four TIE fighters.

Before she called her pilots to her wing she hailed her husband. She had to wait ten seconds before Davek answered, "This is the *Jaggel Fel*. Report."

"I'm clear of the asteroid belt. Four pilots left."

"Understood. The *Makati* is about to breach into the bubble. I'll have them launch strike teams."

"Same target as before?"

"Affirmative."

Charging a super star destroyer would never be easy, but it was what they'd been assigned to do. She could feel Vitor still alive, but he felt different now. He was not panicked, exactly, but she knew he was in danger.

"Understood. Will comply."

She killed the connection and swung her ship around until she could see the long pale sword that was *Nemesis*, distant but directly ahead. Then she opened the connection to Knight Squadron.

The time for caution was over. Now was all for haste.

"Knights Two, Five, and Eight," Marasiah called out. They were the only ones left. "Form up on me. We're going in."

They strapped the unconscious prisoner to a repulsor-bed and sent him straight up to the bridge. They'd called ahead to explain the identity of the intruder but when they pushed Prince Vitor Fel onto the command deck, Grave and Veers both stared down at him in shock.

Fel's eyelids and fingers were starting to twitch as sensation trickled back to his body. Kroan could feel the young man emerging to consciousness, just in time. A glance at the tactical holo told him that much had changed since he'd left and all for the worst. Davek Fel's ships were tearing holes through the asteroid belt and manually-detonated mines weren't enough to stop them. One big star destroyer, *Legator*-class, had almost breached the protected zone, and a half-dozen smaller but still-potent ships, mostly *Pellaeon*-class, were following its wake. Those alone would give *Nemesis* a tough but winnable fight, but two more battle groups had also nearly bored through. One of those, Kroan saw, was led by a ship marked by white light. Emperor Fel's flagship, no doubt.

The Sith Lord looked to Grave and Veers and said, "I believe I arrived just in time."

Vitor Fel began to jerk against his minds. His eyes fluttered as he fought his way back to full consciousness. Kroan suggested, "We should unstrap him and put him on his knees. It would make for a more effective presentation, don't you think?"

"Can you restrain him?" asked Veers. Grave shot him a confused look.

"I can."

"His weapons?"

"I destroyed them," said Kroan. The only lightsabers beneath his cloak were his own.



"Get him up," said Grave. "Comm, hail the *Jagged Fel*. Prep a holo-transmission, wide-beam."

As the stunned crew started to work, two cortosis-armored troopers unstrapped Fel from the repulsor-bed, unbinding everything but the stun cuffs that held his wrists together. Before they could take hold of him, Kroan simply tipped the bed with a flick of the Force. Fel spilled over and clattered hard on the deck. They'd not bothered to take off his cortosis armor but that didn't matter now, not when he had head exposed, wrists bound and Kroan's greater power suppressing his use of the Force.

The entire bridge stopped and stared. The crew in the pits stood up and craned their necks for the sight of their dread enemy's favorite son fumbling to stand. With another motionless tug, Kroan lifted him on his knees and slid him across the deck to where Veers and Grave stood.

The admiral stared at Fel, then at Kroan, and he finally stared to get it. He looked at Kroan with fear and respect and only turned away when the comm lieutenant announced that they'd opened a channel with the *Jagged Fel*.

"All right then," said Veers cheerily. "Put him on."

Kroan stood to the side and let the three of them take up the transmission: Fel on his knees, Grave and Veers on either side. The holo-image that appeared showed Davek Fel, royal robes over admiral's uniform. His mouth opened to speak and then he froze as he took in the sight in front of him.

"Surprised?" grinned Veers. He was determined to enjoy this. "I must say, you are braver than I thought, sending your firstborn son to infiltrate us."

"We are willing to negotiate for the release of your son," said Grave. "But first you must order all your vessels to cease fire and immediately stop their advance."

Fel looked so stunned the words didn't have an effect. But then, finally, he nodded and called to offscreen watchers, "All ships, cease fire and hold position!"

It was a little disappointing; Kroan had expected the self-styled emperor to show a little more resolve. It took several minutes for

the cease-fire order to pass down. Grave relayed his own, and soon the entire battle had simmered to a drawn-out stillness. It was the kind of quiet that couldn't last.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're willing to comply," said Veers. He plucked the sidearm holstered at his belt and wagged it above the prince's head. "Now, you're going to meet all our demands, or we splatter your boy's charred brains across the deck."

With more dignity, Grave said, "We *are* willing to negotiate. First and foremost, all your ships will begin their withdrawal from the asteroid belt."

Kroan wasn't sure what Grave was playing for, unless he wanted to stall long enough to get those turbolaser emplacements shooting again. The emperor seemed to have gathered his dignity after the initial shock, and he said, "The Empire has come to see justice done for the crimes against our civilians on Bastion and Muunilist. We cannot rest peacefully until that has been accomplished."

"If you remove your ships from the belt, we can discuss handing over the people responsible for those terrorist attacks."

"Are you suggesting those attacks were not done under your personal direction?"

"I am suggesting that we can decide together how history records this war."

Kroan saw what he was doing now. Grave knew they were cornered. Davek Fel would never let them escape to cause more havoc. The admiral was a logical man; he was trying to strike a favorable surrender.

Veers, however, had no intention or desire to live another day. He whipped the side of his blaster against the prince's head, bowed him forward, then waved his pistol at the admiral's holo. "If you don't start pulling those back immediately we will *kill* your son in front of you! Do you understand that? His Jedi tricks won't save him now!"

"Wait," Vitor croaked as he raised his head. He looked straight up at his father and said, "Don't give in. Don't do what they say."

"We won't *force* you to sacrifice your son," Grave interjected. "That will be *your* choice."

"Don't do it!" Vitor repeated. "Don't give them anything they want?"

Veers stabbed his blaster's barrel into the prince's cheek. "Aren't you afraid to die, Jedi?"

Vitor looked up at him and his face stretched into a wide-eyed grin. "You're not going to kill me," he said. "You *can't* do it!"

The young man radiated an utter, mad certainty in the Force. He wasn't even afraid. Kroan had no idea what to make of it but Veers wasn't impressed by his show. He whipped Vitor yet again, butt-first this time, knocking his head forward.

Veers called to the holo, "You think magic powers will save your son? Well think again."

Grave's hand lashed out. Kroan was faster. His invisible grip wrenched Veers' arm to the side and his blaster-bolt flashed harmlessly into the deck. The drunk ex-moff spun and stared hatred, not at the admiral but at Kroan.

"You can see we're not bluffing," Grave told the emperor. "You will begin pulling back your ships. And *then* we will begin talking details."

When the blaster went off in Veers' hand, Davek was sure he'd see his son die. The shot had gone just barely wide but Veers had meant to kill. Grave was trying to salvage the situation and strike a bargain. They weren't play-acting; both were dead-set on different goals and either could succeed.

Vitor, despite that, picked up his head and stared at his father through the holo-transmission. "Don't give in," he said. "Don't stop. They *can't* kill me."

There was madness in his eyes. In eight years of grueling combat his son had never broken, even though he'd seen and done things that would have pushed lesser men off the brink. Something, finally, had snapped inside, and it broke Davek's heart just to see it.

His sons should never have had to grow up as they did. He'd only wanted them to spend their youths in peace and pass on the gift his father had given him. He saw how badly he'd failed now, and

he felt the pain of that failure, and that pain made it all the harder to make a choice.

He's commanded painful sacrifices, but none of that compared to watching his son die. As an emperor, as a military leader, he knew this battle had to end here with a crushing victory that would stamp out the last embers of the Restorationist movement forever. If even a single spark escaped it could restart the fire and that could not be permitted.

But he was also a father, and that part of him could not watch Vitor die.

Grave seemed like he honestly wanted to negotiate. He might even be willing to surrender *Nemesis*. Davek would have to angle for that option. While leaving the transmission on he stepped to the edge of the field and waved Captain Yorus to his side.

"What's the status on Knight One?" he whispered in the Muun's ear.

"She's formed up with the boarding party. They've slipped beneath *Nemesis*' shield perimeter and are approaching slowly to avoid detection."

"How much time until they can reach the bridge?"

"At current speed, about four minutes."

It would be a risk; a huge, terribly risk. Marasiah would be able to reach out to her son with the Force and tell him to be ready. That would be his best chance to survive. As for Davek, all the Emperor could do was cling to hope and distract the enemy.

He could trust in his wife and trust in the Force.

He stepped back from Yorus and said loudly, "Begin pulling all ships back. Slowly. Tell the *Makati* to fall halfway out of the belt, then hold position."

The Muun gave a questioning look. Davek nodded and he went to relay them. Then the Emperor gathered his dignity and looked back at the three men in the holo.

"Admiral Grave," he said, "Let's continue to negotiate."

Vitor knelt between them, acutely aware of Veers' pistol wiggling inches from his face and aware of so many other things too. He felt

the Sith Lord's mental weight pressing him down so hard his knees and shoulders ached, and he felt the Sith's thoughts hovering over his mind. He felt his mother too; she was close and getting closer and somehow the Restorationists hadn't detected her. Neither had the Sith, and though he ached to reach back out to Marasiah he knew any attempt to use the Force could alert the Sith. He heard his father and Grave speaking too but that barely registered against the rest.

He wouldn't die here. He was certain of it. A Sith would kill him but not *this* Sith and that made all the difference. The rational part of him, the small part left, couldn't believe that was possible. There seemed no way out of this unless his father totally abased himself before Veers and Grave and allowed them to withdraw their still-dangerous fleets. It would be tantamount to surrender and no Emperor could remain in power after throwing away victory to save one man.

But Vitor didn't just believe he'd survive this, he *knew* it, and that knowledge made everything else- the tense dialogue between his father and Grave, Veers drunken derangement, even the Sith oppressing his thoughts- seem as shallow as a holo-play farce. None of them would have any consequence, not for Vitor. They *couldn't*. The Force had told him so and from his dreams' awful decree there could be no denial.

And heard his mother speaking to him still, telling him to be ready, that they were just seconds away. Any attempt to use the Force would alert the Sith but a trained Imperial Knight had other weapons he could use.

Then Marasiah screamed inside and told him *Now!*

He saw a flicker from the left corner of his vision. As some shape filled the viewport Vitor threw his body hard to the right, into Veers' knees. The ex-moff's blaster went off again, skidding across his cortosis back-plate. Vitor kept pushing and knocked the older man over and he rolled over Veers, pinning him down, just in time to see the spectacle at the bridge's broad forward viewport.

One assault shuttle had surged up in front of *Nemesis'* sunken command deck. The deployment hatch on its right side had swung

to face them but it wasn't open yet. Instead four figures in sealed black flight suits clung to the exterior hull. As Vitor watched they pushed off the shuttle, flew across the five-meter gap in an instant, and landed boots against the transparisteel. By that time all four Imperial Knights had already ignited their white saber-blades. They moved with impeccable grace, each one delivering a single straight slash through the window to make rectangular opening.

Pressure popped the slab of transparisteel into the vacuum. The shuttle swung away and just barely dodged its ejection, then swung back. The Knights were already through the gap and the shuttle slammed against the transparisteel to almost perfectly plug the cut-open hole. As that deployment hatch finally opened and stormtroopers began pouring out the black-suited Knights were moving fast. One quickly disarmed a pair of stormtroopers. Another used the Force to throw Grave to the ground.

The two cortosis-armored troopers who'd come with the Sith Lord surged forward. One Knight, visibly smaller than the others, danced toward them. Vitor, still sprawled on top of Veers, watched as his mother gracefully sheared the barrel off one soldier's rifle, then used the Force to hurl the second into a crew pit. Then she was back on the first, dodging a desperate punch by an armored fist. Even in her bulky flight suit Marasiah could spin on the balls of one foot, come around behind the trooper, and drive the tip of her blade through the unarmed patch behind his left knee.

The second trooper dropped, and then the Sith Lord attacked. Vitor struggled to his feet with his hands still bound. The black-robed Sith fell on her like a great stormcloud, red saber flashing like lighting as one stroke after another knocked Marasiah off-balance. The new stormtroopers aimed their rifles but couldn't fire for fear of hitting their Empress. The other Knights moved to help but Vitor threw himself forward.

The Sith's blade slipped low, beneath Marasiah's. It cut through her flight suit, through her side, right below the ribcage. Vitor could feel his mother's pain and she seemed to collapse in slow-motion, falling backward to the deck. The Sith shifted grip on his lightsaber to plunge it down through her heart.

Vitor leapt between them and thrust himself onto the blade.

Red energy flashed, shuddered, then died against the cortosis armor on his chest. He saw the shock on the Sith's scarred face, then delivered a strong forward kick to the man's guts. The Sith stumbled back, and as the other Knights advanced he released a burst of Force lightning. Pain leaped through Vitor's body and he collapsed beside his mother but the Sith didn't strike again. He had no weapon to defend against three more Knights and two dozen stormtroopers. As rifle-shots nipped at his heels he darted through the blast doors for the exit. Two knights and a herd of troopers ran after them.

Vitor rolled off his mother. Hands still awkwardly bound in front of him, he pulled off his her flight helmet to see her face. It was slick with sweat and distorted by pain.

"Mom!" he cried, and reached for her side. "Can you-"

"Stand aside, please!" a stormtrooper called. Vitor rolled back and watched as the man dropped beside Marasiah and took out a medical kit. As another trooper used a vibro-knife to cut his hands free he kept watching his mother's face. It relaxed as the medic injected anesthetic and announced that he'd sealed the wound.

Vitor couldn't feel relieved. His mother had been so close to dying in front of him. He'd been insane to think this all a shadow-play. He knew where death was waiting for him, but not for the people he loved.

Marasiah reached out. Her small hand grabbed his and squeezed hard. Her mouth creaked open as she said, "Stand me up. Please."

Vitor and the medic held her on either side and lifted her to her feet. He finally took in the full scene. Air still hissed out through the minute gap between the assault shuttle and the cut-open window, but the bridge was in no danger of depressurizing. His father's stormtrooper unit had disarmed their counterparts. The Restorationist crew at the command stations and in the pits looked frightened and confused, but he didn't sense anyone tempted toward danger.

He looked behind him. The stormtroopers and knights were coming back, shaking their heads. Veers was staggering to his feet. He had his blaster back in his hand but it lolled at his side and he was very aware of the two stormtroopers with rifles aimed at his chest. Vitor saw the fourth Knight helping Admiral Grave to his feet. The man straightened his uniform with utmost dignity.

This disturbance hadn't gone unnoticed. Explosions were bursting in the space outside. Someone had re-started the fight.

With Vitor and the medic's help, Marasiah shifted to face the admiral and ex-moff. Grave looked on them with resentment and spite but also resignation. Veers was, amazingly, amused.

"You are *our* captives now," Marasiah said, commanding despite her pained wince.

"Your soldiers are fighting and dying again," said the Emperor from the holo-display. His blue electric ghost had been watching the whole time. "I will *not* allow them to escape. Surrender officially, and we can end this."

Grave looked at the holo, then around the bridge, appalled beyond words by the sudden reversal. Veers shook his head, slipped a silly grin, and began to laugh. It was a high-pitched giggle, drunk and weirdly boyish. Then the old moff hefted his blaster and shot two blasts at the holo-display. The lasers broke through Davek's image, hit the console behind it, and released a rain of sparks. The holo went out in an instant.

"I do not like voyeurs," Veers announced. He turned around and saw the stormtroopers one step closer, blasters leveled at his face. "Oh, all right," the ex-moff sighed. "That wasn't as satisfying as I'd hoped."

Instead of dropping the blaster he tucked it inside his belt. With a slow, exaggerated motion, he reached into his back pocket and drew out a metal drinking flask. As the whole bridge watched Veers unscrewed the cap, tilted his head back, and swallowed what was inside. Five continuous gulps later he took the flask away, tilted it upside-down, and watched the last flecks fall out.

"Now *that* was satisfying," he said.



Veers threw the flask down. It cracked onto the deck right between to the two stormtroopers, drawing their attention away for the split-second he needed to grab his blaster. Vitor prepared to shield his mother, but Veers flipped the barrel-tip to his temple and squeezed the trigger.

His body jerked, then collapsed. Some stared; others looked away. Silence spread for one long, horrified minute before Marasiah looked at Grave and said, "As Empress, I will accept your surrender."

Grave took his eyes from Veers' corpse with effort. His looked around the bridge with a loose, dazed expression, but when his eyes found Marasiah it became hard again.

"There's nothing to accept," the admiral rasped. "Execute me if you want, Jedi. But this was my cause. I will not surrender."

Marasiah said, very softly, "My husband always respected your talent, and your professionalism. He said he wishes you'd made better choices."

"I've done what I've done." Graves closed his eyes, as if preparing for the death blow.

Vitor knew his mother wouldn't kill him, but he could feel the bridge crew tense in anticipation and dread. Marasiah nodded to the nearest stormtroopers, who produced stun-cuffs and pinned Grave's wrists behind his back. All the while the man had kept his eyes closed and held tilted back, stubborn in his misplaced honor.

Marasiah raised her voice and asked, "Who is the commanding officer of this ship?"

A white-haired and thin man stepped away from the tactical station. "My name is Captain Hough Fenrec."

"Captain, will you broadcast a surrender order?"

The old officer must have felt the eyes of all his crew boring into him. Through the Force Vitor sensed that they were only waiting, hoping for nothing, expecting anything.

Fenrec looked to the communications station. "I'm not sure if such an order is possible."

The comm lieutenant, meekly sitting beside the smoking console, said, "Our backup systems are still operational."

"All right, then." The captain swallowed hard and told Marasiah, "I'll give the command immediately."

It had been years since Korosh Vull had seen the insides of a *Kontos*-class frigate. Just being here brought him back decades, to *Shildbreaker* and *Voidwalker* both. After they reeled his ejection seat in from the void they hurried him through familiar-looking halls to a familiar-looking infirmary, where a young woman in medical whites gave him a look-over and told what he already knew.

The ship trembled intermittently with explosions throughout and once they pronounced him uninjured Vull flashed his rank badge and demanded to see the captain. An ensign appeared and guided him down more familiar-looking halls, all the way to the bridge. The deck shook just as he stepped through and saw explosions flash across the bow. Yet when he spotted the tactical display he was surprised. An hour, at least, had elapsed since he'd ejected and he expected the battle at the heart of the asteroid belt to be fully joined. Instead it seemed like the enemy ships were still waiting on the edge of the open space. They were still fighting and this frigate, from what Vull could tell, was right on the edge of the open zone and engaged in battle with a newer *Ardent*-class ship. It was longer, wider, and more advanced than a *Kontos*-class; he didn't see how this ship stood a chance.

The bridge rocked as more turbolaser volleys hit its shields. Vull stepped carefully across the deck until he spotted a man in captain's bars bent over the gunnery section of the crew pit, giving orders. Vull waited until he was standing up to announce himself.

"General Vull!" The man- so young- snapped a salute. "I heard you'd come aboard. My name is Captain Leland. Welcome to-"

"Captain!" someone called, "*Nemesis* is releasing a general broadcast."

"Good. Put it on main speakers."

The comm officer flipped a switch, and even as another volley rocked the bridge a voice spoke loud and clear. Vull had been

expecting Grave, or if not him Veers. When he heard Captain Fenrec instead he knew something terrible had happened.

"All Restorationists ships, this is Captain Hough Fenrec. As commanding officer of the flagship *Nemesis* I order all vessels to surrender immediately. I repeat, we will all *surrender*. Head of State Veers is dead. Admiral Grave has been arrested. In their stead I command every ship to cease fire *immediately*."

Crew passed shocked stares across the bridge. After so long a fight it seemed almost mockery to have the end decreed by that captain's creaking voice. When people looked at the frigate's captain the young man fumbled for something to say.

There was the sound of faint shuffling over the comm, and then a new voice came on. It was firm and female and Vull had known it for twenty-five years.

"This is Empress Marasiah Fel," she said. "I am also speaking from the bridge of *Nemesis*. This ship is now under control of your rightful leader, Emperor Davek Fel. All captains, if you do not formally surrender your ships to the nearest Imperial vessel in the next three minutes you will be considered hostile and fired upon. Please consider the lives of your crew. That is all."

The comm line clicked off. More and more people stared at Captain Leland and he still didn't know what to say. Nobody noticed the rank bars on Vull's chest and he didn't call attention to them; he had no answers for them either.

He'd been prepared for an ugly fight to the death. He'd been ready to make them pay. He'd even desired a blaze of dying glory, as if that could atone for his unwittingly calling the enemy on them in the first place.

"Captain," the comm lieutenant said, "We're getting another general broadcast. It's from the *Annihilator*."

"Put it on," the bewildered captain said.

Vull recalled that ship: a *Compellor*-class destroyer with a bitter old warhorse as a commanding officer. His half-familiar voice filled the gap left by Marasiah's.

"This is Captain Vergess of the Imperial warship *Annihilator*," the man called. "I do *not* surrender! I will *not* give up the war! All

captains who will *not* bow to the puppet-emperor, fall in with me and we will fight our way out of here!"

The signal ended abruptly. As Leland stood planted in the middle of the deck, confounded and useless, Vull looked over at the tactical holo. *Annihilator* wasn't far off and it was already pushing toward a gap torn through the asteroid belt. Two *Pellaeon*-class star destroyers filled it, with a handful of support ships waiting behind them. That was more than enough to handle *Annihilator* but Vull saw one more destroyer, *Predator*-class, surging to join them plus a few more frigates and gunships. The rest of the Restorationist fleet seemed to be sitting in place, engines cooled and guns silent, surrendered.

The ships Vergess had rallied probably wouldn't be enough to escape, but they'd make an admirable blaze of glory.

"Captain Leland," a lieutenant pleaded, "What do we *do*?"

The young man, still shocked stupid, ran a hand through his messy hair. "We, ah.... Prepare a signal. Prepare to tell them-"

"We do *not* surrender!" Vull cried. He stepped up beside the captain, into the center of attention, and drew himself stiff and tall. "I am *General* Korosh Vull and as ranking officer I *refuse* to lay down arms! Helm, plot us a course toward *Annihilator*. Guns, prepare a firing solution. Shields, get ready for a pounding."

All those crewmen- so many of them so young- stared at him for the first time. The rank badge on his chest called attention. His shouted orders commanded it. It gave a rush, having all those eyes on you. He wondered if it felt like this for Davek Fel on *Voidwalker*, and wondered if the rush hadn't started him on the ego-trip that had made him emperor.

Because their general had ordered it and because they were too stunned to think for themselves, the crew hurried to obey. They veered away from the *Ardent*-class frigate and the battle waiting settled in the center of the viewport, distant but approaching fast. Vull could clearly see the explosions burst between *Annihilator* and the two opposing star destroyers as the three wedge-shaped warships plunged toward each other. The *Predator*-class destroyer was joining too, along with a handful of little *Dart*-class gunships,

one more *Kontos*-class frigate, and flocks of TIE-Xs and TIE Demolishers itching for a final, suicidal fight.

Vull knew exactly how they felt. As the battle drew closer Vull remained at the center of the deck with Captain Leland beside him. The young man was still speechless by the turn of events.

To prod him, Vull asked, "What is the name of this ship? I never got it."

"We're the *Oathkeeper*, sir."

"Hmm. A good name." One would almost believe the universe had a sense of humor.

It only took a few more minutes before *Oathkeeper* joined *Annihilator* and the other ships in battle. By then the firefight had grown fierce. Two star destroyers pounded two other destroyers and the narrowing space between them was so bright with laserfire and explosions Vull squinted to watch head-on.

As *Annihilator* tried to drive its wedge between the *Pellaeon*-class ships, the *Predator*-class surged forward and didn't slow as it entered firing range. It took the nearest enemy destroyer by the flank and the ship tried to lurch back as it found itself battling two at once. The *Predator*-class didn't slow even then, and Vull and Leland both watched in awe as two destroyers collided. The prow pushed through shields and tore through superstructure until it triggered a chain of explosions that swallowed both vessels.

Leland staggered back, hands over his eyes to shield from the glare, but Vull spun on the crew pit and called, "They just tore an opening! Helm, push ahead! Get us through!"

They were still too shocked to do anything but obey. As the explosions darkened and cooled they left behind a tangle of debris denser than any patch of the asteroid belt, but the space around it was clear of enemy fire as the remaining *Pellaeon*-class destroyer struggled to hold its own against *Annihilator*.

*Oathkeeper* plunged through the gap, along with a pair of smaller gunships. The three warships passed above the gnarled remains of the dead *Pellaeon*-class and pushed for the edge of the belt. The channel blasted through by the invading ships was already starting to close from the inevitable drift of the asteroids. An enemy

frigate, another *Ardent*-class, was ahead of them and trying to clog the channel. It threw squadrons of TIE-Xs and TIE Demolishers directly at *Oathkeeper*, and soon the frigate shuddered under more impacts on its shields. Those gunships were good anti-starfighter craft but they had no snubfigthers of their own out there to help, and within a minute one burst after taking too many barrages from a squadron of Demolishers.

"Keep pushing! Keep pushing!" Vull shouted at the crew.

They'd work a miracle or they'd die in a blaze of glory; he'd taken either over pitiful surrender. As the enemy frigate surged close he honestly wished they'd ram it as that *Predator*-class ship had, just to ensure they took one enemy ship out. The helm crew had ideas of their own. Instead of slamming into the bigger vessel they tried to rear above it. As they did so a drift of asteroids impact with their shields, knocking them as hard as any missiles. The space rocks tumbled into the nearby ships as well, punching a hole through the enemy frigate's hull and smashing the remaining gunship into gnarled wreckage.

*Oathkeeper's* crew pushed them on without Vull needing to tell them. They soared past the enemy frigate and pushed for the edge of the belt. The enemy, even wounded, pivoted to give pursuit. Its missiles began to rock *Oathkeeper's* aft shields and when the deck nearly threw him off his feet Vull knew a warhead and gotten through.

"Damage report?" he called.

"Critical hit to one engine," an officer reported. "Just triggered automatic shut-down. Remaining engines struggling to compensate."

"Hyperdrives?"

"Still online, General," another called.

They'd never get a chance to use it. The exit from the asteroid belt was too far away and with decreased speed the enemy frigate would overtake them and annihilate them with its superior firepower.

He knew that. There was no escape. But he could still get that blaze of glory. They could halt, pivot, show their broadsides to the

enemy, and tear a large and lethal hole in its hull before it destroyed *Oathkeeper* entirely.

Not a bad way to die, Vull thought. Better than surrender.

He opened his mouth to give the order when a confused tactical lieutenant called, "Sir, the frigate, it's stopping."

"Decelerating?" Vull frowned.

"No, sir. It looks like it took damage to two engines. *Bad* damage. They're shutting down the third."

They must have shut off their aft shields as they chased *Oathkeeper*. An asteroid might have come in from the side, or maybe a chunk of debris. It didn't matter. Death was on hold yet again. He was either cursed or blessed and couldn't tell which.

"Helm, get us out of here," Vull said through his teeth. "Hyperdrives, get a course ready. Anything to get us out of the Kovix Cluster."

As the helm chief barked assent white lights suddenly flared off *Oathkeeper's* bow. They were spotlights, flashed on the frigate's command tower, though Vull couldn't see the source beyond a thin shape, smooth and black as space, sitting directly ahead.

Before he could call for weapons the comm lieutenant said, "General, Captain. We're being hailed."

"Is it that ship?" Vull pointed at the lights ahead.

The lieutenant shrugged helplessly. Vull marched over to the comm station with Leland lagging behind him. He bent over the console and said, "This is Imperial General Korosh Vull aboard the warship *Oathkeeper*. Who the hell is this?"

"General Vull? I have to say I'm surprised." The voice was smooth and deep and vaguely familiar.

"Identify yourself. Is that your ship? Did you—"

"I did disable that frigate pursuing you, yes. My vessel is not supremely armed, but as you've noticed it's very difficult to see coming. You are, by the way, welcome."

"Thank you, but who *are* you?"

"We were introduced as Retor of Kuhlvalt," the voice said. "But it would be better to call me Darth Kroan. I'm attaching a set of

coordinates to this transmission and will be jumping there momentarily. I strongly suggest you join me."

"For *what*?"

"Your side has surrendered. Your cause is utterly and finally lost. Do you have anywhere *better* to be?"

And with that, the man killed the connection. The comm lieutenant looked at his console and said, "We *did* receive a set of coordinates. Should I... send them to helm control?"

Vull didn't know what to say. When he thought of his brief meeting with the man- Retor or Kroan- what he remembered most was that unnatural golden tint to his eyes. That wasn't a man he could trust or even like, but he had saved their lives, and more, he was right.

They had no place else to be.

Vull looked out the viewport. The lights ahead were gone and so was that black ship. He sighed and said, "Send helm control our new course, Lieutenant."

As they drew out from the asteroid field the stars shone clear and uninterrupted on all sides. They were free, finally, escaped from that living death. They were one small ship and they were the only ones left to carry the fire of those they'd left behind.

Captain Leland, hovering close to Vull this whole time, whispered, "We're just one ship... But this all started with one little frigate, didn't it?"

Vull stared at the young man and realized with delay that he must have been talking about that single Kaleesh ship, the *Grievous*. It has escaped the interdiction of its homeworld, then seized and destroyed the shuttle carrying Head of State Neela Avaris. From that one act all of this had followed. Leland was right, but he was also wrong.

This had really begun with another little frigate, even longer ago. Davek Fel's story had started there, and Marasiah's, and in a way Korosh Vull's had too.

One little frigate could change the course of history. It had done so before, it could do so again.

\* \* \*



When the battle was finally over, when the last of fighting ships had been ground to wreckage and the remaining captains surrendered to Imperial boarding parties, Davek admitted that it had all gone better than he could have hoped.

There had been losses, yes. Those two *Pellaeon*-class destroyers, ruined after the official call of surrender, hurt the most. But at the climax of that battle he'd been dead certain he was about to see his son die. Now Vitor was alive. Marasiah was alive. This long war for the Empire's soul was finally won. His father could finally rest in triumph.

That thought was enough to sustain him through the tiring process of post-battle checks and evaluations. It kept him on his feet, exhausted by happy, after receiving reports from Jaeger and his senior captains, followed by another series of talks with Marasiah and Vitor from *Nemesis*' bridge. They'd taken that super star destroyer mostly intact and Davek still didn't know what he'd do with it. *Nemesis* was the kind of grand deadly weapon Palpatine would have loved, and his father had never approved of it. Still, it would be a waste to throw away such a potent tool. It had originally been called *Invincible* and it was supposed to have brought comfort and confidence to an Empire wracked by invaders from the Unknown Regions. Rechristened with its original name, it could be a good symbol again.

Davek was pondering that during a quiet moment on the *Jagged Fel*'s bridge when the comm lieutenant called him over.

"Your Majesty, we have a signal encrypted on one of your personal frequencies."

It wouldn't be Vitor, not this time. "What's the source?"

The lieutenant checked the board and frowned. "That is.... undetermined, Your Majesty."

"Give me some space, Lieutenant."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

As the officer hurried out of earshot, Davek hunched over the console and opened the connection. A holo-image appeared in front of him showing the head and shoulders of an old woman with long white hair falling on either side of her face. He hadn't spoken

to his mother's friend Tahiri in a decade and barely remembered her.

"Master Veila," he said with foreboding, "This is very unexpected."

"Emperor Fel, I'm calling from Zonama Sekot," Tahiri said. "I have to insist you come here as fast as you can. Bring your sons."

"Is my mother-"

"Jaina's dying," Tahiri said. "Please hurry. There's not much time."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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Even from space, Loracan wasn't much to look at. Most of the surface was a briny blue-green, and from the *Bottom Line's* position when it dropped out of hyperspace, Tamar could make out two separate island continents, both featureless and pale. Nonetheless the planet hung in front of them, filling the cockpit's viewport, and felt like some kind of omen.

"Now what?" she asked, slightly hushed, as she stood behind Mekk's pilot seat.

"I called ahead and contacted the local government, such as it is. They dug up their registry of mining facilities on the southern continent and sent me a copy."

"Smart of you."

"I can do smart, don't act surprised. Anyway, I ran through the list. Found one facility registered to a barve named Horum Auch, founded eight years pre-Empire."

"I'm surprised it's not buried in the sand by now," Jind said from the co-pilot's seat.

"Those deserts there are mostly salt crystals, mixed in with other mineral strains," Mekk said. "And the mining outpost is in a mountain range. The register contained their spatial coordinates."

Shouldn't be too hard to find, even if Auchs threw up a sensor-jamming net."

"Can you get a line to Marin?" Tamar asked Jind.

He tapped his comm console. "Go ahead."

Tamar raised her voice. "Are you there, *Mar'ika*?"

"Standing by," her daughter said. "Do you have coordinates for me?"

"That we do," said Jind. "Sending them now. You know where to meet us."

"Copy, coordinates received. You getting anything on scanners yet?"

"Not yet," said Mokr. "We'll let you know when we do."

"Good. On my way now."

The line clicked off. As *Bottom Line* began to shudder through Loracan's upper atmosphere Mokr said, "She a good flyer, your girl?"

"She's her father's child." Tamar tried to sound glib. They were all shielding their anxiety with banter. Typical Mando behavior.

"Well, for once I'm glad to hear it," said Mokr. "Now get to a seat and strap in, *Tam'ika*. This ride could get bumpy any second."

Very few ships passed through the skies of Loracan and ever fewer fell out of space directly toward the southern continent, which hosted only a quarter of the world's already meager population. When the redoubt's sensors announced that a ship was doing exactly that, Kaynar Auchs knew his enemies were coming.

After being forced to accept that his clan-mates wouldn't rally around him as these Skiratas had their dead, he struggled to decide the next step. He'd tried to contact Shalk Jeban for updates but the old man had never responded. If they'd gotten to Jeban they might find him here, but they'd also be tracing Kaynar's other associates. That meant his best hope to escape vengeance meant taking Yaga and fleeing to the Outer Rim, sulking on backwaters and taking worse jobs for worse pay, always afraid vengeful Skiratas might find him. Kaynar hadn't done all this to live the rest of his life cowering and afraid.

When his sensors announced one mid-sized vessel dropping fast, directly on his location, he'd had just enough time to set and arm a few portable missile launchers he'd kept aboard *Ultimatum*. The devices were patched into the old mining station's sensors and when a ship got close they'd automatically track and fire. That probably wouldn't be enough to take down a bunch of Mandos who'd come prepared to fight it was the best he could do. Surprise might buy him enough time to punch out with *Ultimatum* and get his son to safety.

The launchers he'd rigged would take care of themselves, so he hurried Yaga into *Ultimatum* and prepared to take off. The camo netting spread over them blocked sensor-sweeps in both directions but the data from the missile launchers fed into his shipboard computer and give him a telemetry on the ship bearing down. Firing his engines would release heat to give himself away, camo net or no, and he settled with warming his repulsors and kicking into a gentle hover over the landing pad while the enemy approached.

Yaga was strapped tight into the co-pilot's seat. They'd hastily put on their armor and checked their weapons in preparation for anything. The boy was tense but not panicked. He'd been through life-threatening situations before and, deservedly or not, he trusted his father to protect him.

Kaynar promised himself he'd do that much, no matter what else happened. He may have never amounted to much as a Mando warrior, but he was still a father.

They watched together in tense silence as the ship crew closer, closer. It was barely slowing down as it barreled through the atmosphere. It finally started to decelerate just as it approached the trigger range for the missile launchers. Kaynar's hands tensed on the ship's control yoke. His breath held. Closer, closer. When four missiles shot into the sky he kicked the repulsors to full. *Ultimatum* burst through the camo net, pulling it from its stakes and dragging the whole thing with them until he banked hard enough to shake it off.

When it fell away like a discarded wrapper Kaynar saw everything bright in the midday sun: the jagged yellow-stone

mountains, the endless stretch of white salt plain, the clear pale-blue sky, the dark shape of the enemy freighter as it juked hard to evade the chasing missiles. The warheads converged on it nearly as one. The first three exploded hard against its shields but the fourth got through, tearing a smoking hole out of the hull and forcing the ship to drop altitude as its engines strained.

Kaynar didn't want to see if it crashed. He had his opened and he took it. He pointed *Ultimatum* skyward and threw all power to the engines.

His eyes were on the skies but his son's were on the sensors, and Yaga was the one who bleated "Watch out!" just before their whole ship rocked violently. A second ship streaked in front of his, then wheeled around to attack from behind. He only saw it for a second but he instantly recognized an ancient X-wing fighter, S-foils wide and ready for attack.

"Where did it come from?" Kaynar snarled and reached for the shield controls.

"I don't know! I think it came from the mountains!" Yaga cried.

When Kaynar tried to raise shields, the computer beeped angry denial. "*Shab* it. Take the guns," he told Yaga.

By then the enemy ship was behind them. Before his son could get the turret firing the entire ship shook with the hard impact of a warhead. Alarms in the cockpit screamed from all directions. The sky fell away and the viewport filled with featureless white, rising fast to take them. The control yoke shook hard, like it was trying to throw him off, but he didn't release. As he tried to wrestle them away from a hard crash he fired repulsors and dropped landing gear, anything to soften the blow. The white fell closer, swallowing their vision, and then they hit ground.

He released the yoke and grabbed the sides of his chair to keep himself pinned as the entire cockpit shook hard. The violence of first impact was the worst but the jarring vibrations continued as their broken ship slid across the salt plain. Finally they came to a lurching, violent halt. The cockpit's alarms still wailed. Some of the computers were lit and functional, others dead. He didn't need them to know this ship wouldn't fly again.

The ones he'd failed to kill would be on them soon. He knew it, and felt the abyss of absolute failure yawn beneath him. It would be so easy to fall in and admit what he'd known all his life: he was an embarrassment as an Auchs, as a Mando warrior, as a father, and all attempts at rectification had brought humiliation and death. It was easy to fall because it was all true.

But he looked sidelong at Yaga. The boy was badly jarred from the crash but stirring. His hands fumbled to release his crash webbing. Even after all this, his son knew what to do.

"Are you all right?" Kaynar asked as he stared to undo his own.

"I'm okay, *buir*. Just a little knocked around."

"You're not hurt."

"No. I'm okay."

"Good." Kaynar released his restraints and started to rise. "Get your *buy'c*, *ad'ika*. Get your weapons. We'll go down fighting."

The Skiratas were coming for them, and there was no way out, but Kaynar wouldn't let them touch his son until they'd gotten through him.

The crashed ship left a long dark streak across the flat white plain. A pillar of black smoke from its shattered engine section rose straight into the windless air. Marin slowed her X-wing, lowered landing struts, and set it down ten meters from the ship's final resting spot.

When she popped the cockpit she dropped straight down, using the Force to soften her landing. Her boots crunched audibly on the ground's mixture of mineral particles and salt crystals and she could feel the sun beating hard on her helmet and shoulder-pads. Ninet's armor felt tight all around her, the T-visor *beskar* helmet constraining. She tried to tell herself that was as it should be. She was doing this as a Mandalorian and nothing else. She'd left her lightsaber in her cockpit and the Jedi part of her too. Hopefully she could go back to being one, once this was over.

The *Bottom Line* had taken a bad missile hit but was lurching in their direction. As Marin slowly approached Auchs' ship she knew she could wait for them; it would be for the best. But as she walked

she dared reach out with the Force, just a little, to sense how many people were inside. Just two people,, both jarred and frightened.

Two Skiratas dead on Mandalore. Two Auchs dead here. That would be justice on Mando terms. It would be *right*.

She lost the chance to hesitate when the hatch on the side of the ship popped open. Laser blasts immediately flew her way and instinct told her to use a lightsaber that wasn't there. She did her best to dodge but a few blasts pounded her *beskar* breastplate as she moved. Marin pulled her blaster and fired three shots in reply. She could see one Mando clearly, halfway through the hatch. Her blasts forced him back a step and she charged. The warrior kept firing with one hand and reached for his belt with the other. Marin saw the grenade arc toward her and her armor took a few direct hits in the same moment. Instinct grabbed her and this time it succeeded. She plucked the grenade from the air with her mind and tossed it aside. It rolled away and detonated, shaking the plain, but this reaction had clearly stunned her attacker.

That gave her the opening she needed. Marin charged in, firing blast after blast into the Mando's armor. When she got close enough she lunged. *Beskar* crashed against *beskar* as they both tumbled through the airlock and into the ship.

Marin came out on top, but he was bigger than she was. She tried a flat-handed chop down on his neck but he caught her by the wrist. She felt his body twist beneath hers and saw him grab the blaster on the floor. Her other hand shot down and caught it by the barrel. When she tried to wrest it away it went off in his hand, heating the barrel under her gloved palm.

That was when someone shot her in the head. Her helmet ringed around her as she fell back. She knew in an instant the *beskar* dome had saved her life. The man she'd been fighting was rearing to his feet and reaching for a knife strapped to his belt. Behind him, standing in the portal to an adjoining hallway, was a second Mando. This one looked smaller, lighter, maybe female, and they had a long-barrel rifle hefted in both hands.

The Force was the only tool she had left. She used it. An invisible hand wrenched the rifle's long barrel into a right angle.



The Mando using it bleated in surprise, distracting the bigger one for just a second. Marin threw herself upright and grabbed for his knife. She got one hand on his wrist but he was stronger and the blade dipped close enough to cut the black body-suit at her side and tear the skin over her left ribs.

Even as pain spread through her body, she knew he hadn't hit any organs. She could still fight. She cracked her helmet hard against his, knocked him a step back, then called on the Force again. A burst of power shattered his right elbow and she finally wrenched the knife from his broken arm.

The man- this had to be Kaynar Auchs- staggered back and shouted, "Who are you? *What* are you?"

She could only tell him the truth. "I killed your brother! Not Ninet! Not Dorn! *Me!*"

The man stared in shock but his partner leaped in to take Marin on her flank. Twisting hurt her side but she ignored it. She grabbed her attacker's blaster in one hand and used the Force to strengthen her grip, crushing it. A swipe of the leg was enough to knock the younger Mando off-balance and drop him hard to the deck with the crunch of a broken leg.

But then Kaynar was on her. He'd pulled another knife- a narrow, nasty stiletto- and thrust at her. Marin knew how to fight with blades. She pivoted so the stiletto scraped across her *beskar*, then flipped her own knife out and slid it under the man's chest-plate and into his ribs.

That didn't stop him. His free hand lashed out and grabbed her neck. She had no armor for protection as he squeezed hard against her windpipe. She dug the knife in, as deep as she could, but he didn't release and she couldn't breathe. He wouldn't let go until both of them were dead.

She knew that through instinct, through the Force. Because the Force was all she had she reached deeper. She felt the man's anger and frustration and despair, his hatred for her, his hatred for *himself*, for his brothers, for everything that had placed them here on this miserable deserted world with knives in each other, dying in a fight neither of them wanted.

And when she felt his hate it was so easy to find hate of her own, hate for all those same things and more. Hate was her last weapon she had and she called on it, let it funnel through her and come manifest through the Force. As her knife dug deeper into Kaynar's side her other hand grabbed his neck as his grabbed hers, and as he squeezed her windpipe hard enough to crush she summoned much greater power. Light came from her fingers as blue sparks. They spread in a flash and danced across his body and through it, rending every cell with raw destructive energy.

Pain made him release her throat. He tried to stagger back as she gasped for air but she wouldn't let him. Marin drew her knife roughly from his chest, switched the angle of the blade, and slashed it fast across his neck.

Blood sprayed out across her helmet, casting her vision red. All she heard through Kaynar's helmet was a muffled gurgle as he dropped to his knees. Still gasping, she wiped the blood from her visor with her free hand. Vision cleared just in time to see Kaynar Auchs pitch to one side, land hard on his shoulder, then roll onto his back. Blood still pooled from his slit neck. His face was invisible behind its mask when he died.

And as she stared down at his corpse Marin realized how it had happened, how *easy* it had been to surrender to her anger and the Force flow out of her in the most destructive way. She'd marched into this fight telling herself it was duty to her family, to the people she'd loved and lost, and she'd do it as they did, as Mandos, not as a Jedi.

She hadn't killed Kaynar as a Mandalorian or a Jedi. She'd been something much worse than either.

That was when she remembered the other Mando. They were on the floor, backed against the far bulkhead, holding a blaster pistol in two shaking hands. Marin staggered toward them. The blaster went off and the shot sailed over her shoulder. She dropped the knife and kept walking. The Mando fired again. It took her in the shoulder-plate, staggered her, but she kept on. She used the Force, hesitantly, cautiously, to take the blaster's barrel and twist it beyond use.

The young Mando dropped the gun and cowered on the floor. Marin crouched in front of him and removed his helmet with both hands. She found herself looking at the smooth thin face of a terrified boy. He must have been thirteen, fourteen. The same age she'd been when her lucky slash had killed Gevern Auchs and changed her life, his life, Kaynar's life and her mother's life and too many more to count. And she knew, from the mental echoes of Kaynar Auchs' last moment, that his son was the one thing spared from all his hate.

"I'm sorry," Marin said. It pained her through just to get it out. "I'm so sorry."

She got up. She staggered backwards for the airlock. The boy stayed on the floor, staring at her, terrified and waiting to die.

When her back hit the airlock portal Marin turned and stumbled out into the light.

The *Bottom Line* had set down. She wrenched off her helmet, exposing her face to the bright sunlight and air thick with salt-smell even on the dry plain. She watched as the landing ramp came down. Tamar was the first one out. Right behind her was a Mando in aged bronze *beskar* she knew as Jovar's.

More followed after them, including Jind and Mekk. Marin stayed where she was, between them and the open hatch. Her mother got to her first and when she took off her helmet, Tamar's eyes were immediately drawn to the bruises on her throat.

"It's okay," Marin's voice cracked. "I got him. He's dead."

"Are you sure?" Mekk asked as he trotted up to her. "Just one?"

"Just one. I'm positive." As her mother examined the wounds on her side she added, "Jedi powers. Remember?"

Tamar lifted her head and their eyes met. Tamar would be able to sense one more life on that broken ship, but she didn't need the Force to see the silent plead on her daughter's face, or to understand.

"She's right," Tamar said. "There's nobody aboard."

Disappointment rippled through the Mandos ringing the crash site, all gleaming in their pointless heavy armor. Jind suggested, "We should still look around. Check the equipment, the computers—"

"Enough," Tamar called. She ran her fingers gently on her daughter's neck "Leave it be. We did what we came to do. We should focus on fixing *Bottom Line*."

"All right," Mekk grunted. "I don't *think* we'll need to scavenge spare parts..."

Marin gave her mother a tiny touch of thanks in Force. Tamar lowered her hand and said, "We need to patch you up. Fix your side wound. Your throat."

"I know," Marin said. "Let's get back to the ship."

Tamar and Jind moved to help her. She stepped forward before either of them did. She walked straight and stiff, trying to ignore the pain in her side. The landing ramp loomed ahead of her, a pale ascending portal. She was almost there when a shock of pain ran out from her side and robbed the strength from her legs.

Marin landed on hands on knees. A few Mandos moved to help but Tamar held them back. She could feel everything her daughter felt and knew she'd welcome no touch. The fullness of everything she'd done here today- everything she'd done for the past eight years leading to this point- finally hit Marin and it was worse than any pain. Her breaths became short and fast and her body heaved from the stomach like she was trying to vomit up everything inside but nothing came. Her vision blurred but no tears rolled to cool her reddened face. She stared at the dirt and trembled and knew all their eyes were on her, witnessing a pain none of them could understand, not even her mother.

When Marin finally found the strength, she pushed herself to her feet and staggered up the ramp without looking back.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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**H**e should have been dead. Instead he was alive and she was dying, dying because of him, and he knew there was nothing he could do to stop it or change the events that had led to this. Kol Skywalker burned with shame and regret that hurt far more than the wound to his body, and when he learned that his mother and brother had arrived, along with the Grand Master and cousins he'd not seen for years, he tried to hide away from them all.

They didn't let him, of course. He tried to hole himself inside his bedroom in the damutek he and the other Jedi trainees lived inside, but a few long hours after the shuttle's arrival he heard a faint knocking on the door and felt his mother on the other side. Without him saying a word, that door slid open and Jade stepped inside.

He'd been sitting on the bed, legs curled against his chest and forehead on his knees, as though by huddling against himself and denying the outside he could deny the terrible things that had happened. Jade sat onto the bed beside him without a word, grabbed him around the shoulders, and squeezed him as hard as she could.

Kol had expected that, and he'd planned to stay stoic, but his mother's touch made him break down crying. He didn't moan or sob, but tears ran down his face and his body shook as Jade held him tighter. He cried for a few minutes, until his breathing grew steady again and he found the strength to tell her, "I'm so, so sorry."

"It's alright, Kol."

"Aunt Jaina... I-"

"It's alright," she repeated, and ran her hands through his hair. "I don't know what I would've done if I'd lost you. Are you okay? How is your body?"

He picked his head off his knees and let her slide a hand to his chest. The blaster shot would have killed him in seconds if Jaina hadn't intervened. Instead of a horrible scorched hole above his heart there was now just pink skin, soft and fresh, a little sensitive. Most of the pain he felt came from his soul, not his body.

When she felt that smooth healed flesh Jade hugged him a little tighter. "Oh, Kol. I'm so glad you're okay."

"I'm *not*, okay." He felt more sobs welling up inside him. "Aunt Jaina... It was *my* fault. I was stupid... I ran up there... I wasn't thinking... I was just trying to be... to be..."

"A Jedi," his mother whispered as she nestled her face in his hair.

"I'm not a Jedi," he whimpered. They'd told him that again and again but he'd never understood it until now. He was a child, a stupid child, and thinking otherwise had gotten Jaina killed.

But Jade said, "You will be. A great one. And it's because of your aunt."

"But it's *my*-"

"It was *her* choice," Jade said. "Don't take that from her. She *chose* to pass her life to yours."

It was enough to make him cry again. This bout of sobs lasted a shorter time, and when he was done his mother told him, "Your aunt's not gone yet. She's fading fast, but she's not gone."

He didn't know if he could face her. Jade tugged him toward the edge of the bed and he let himself be pulled. His legs unfolded,

reached town, and touched the floor. She raised him to his feet with both hands.

"Are they all.... here?" Kol didn't know if he could face his relatives.

"They're not blaming you, Kol. Nobody is." Jade bent forward and stroked his cheek. "What she gave you is a *gift*. You have to treasure that."

He knew it was true, and that it would take time for him to really believe it. He also knew that he couldn't hide from the eyes of his family, not forever. Not if he was still going to become a brave, true Jedi.

Jade moved her hand down to grab his. "Let's go, Kol."

He nodded and stepped through the door. Nat was in the hallway beyond. Kol hadn't even sensed his brother. The older boy stared down at the younger, and Kol felt like he was going to cry again, but Nat stepped up and wrapped his brother in a strong firm hug. Kol bent his head against Nat's chest, returned the hug, and barely kept himself from crying again.

Nat held him tight and hard, like he was afraid his brother might slip away. After a minute his grip started to loosen, and Jade said, "Come on, you two. Everyone's waiting."

They'd placed Jaina inside a quiet damutek on the edge of the Middle Distance. She'd been laid on a bed and they could only watch as she faded in and out of consciousness. Her face looked ravaged and old yet somehow peaceful, and when she drifted into sleep it looked content. When Jade and her sons arrived, a small crowd had already gathered inside. Allana, Arlen, and Lowbacca had also come from Ossus. Roan Fel had too, and the young prince clearly felt out of place around so many Jedi. The rest of his family was coming, but not here yet.

After what had happened in the southern wastes, they'd flown Jaina and Kol to the Middle Distance immediately. Here in the northern hemisphere, the lushness of natural life made Sekot's power stronger too. Kol had already been pushed back from the

brink of death by Jaina, and the living world's strength seemed to have accelerated the healing.

"I'm also doing what I can to keep her alive," Sekot told them as they gathered by Jaina's bedside. "Her life is faint... but I'm trying to blow on the embers and keep them warm until the rest of your family arrives. If this had happened in a place where my powers are greater... Perhaps I could have done more."

Jaina had been asleep for the past several hours, eyes closed, chest rising and falling slowly. Despite that all eyes had been on her until the sudden appearance of a small blonde-haired boy amongst them. Most of them had never seen the living planet manifest itself and fewer had seen it take the form of a young Anakin Skywalker. Kol, Nat, Roan, and even Arlen stared at the boy with shock and curiosity that jarred them from their gloom.

Tahiri Veila had lived on this planet for many years, and the old woman addressed Sekot like a familiar friend. "We appreciate all you're doing more than we can say. I'm sure she does as well."

"I just wish I could do more," Sekot said mournfully, so human.

Arlen looked at his mother and asked, "How long do you think... it can last?"

"Life is a curious thing," Sekot mused. "It weakens and grows, sometimes of its own accord, and death is not its opposite but merely a facet. But you're Jedi. You must know that."

Lowbacca gave a low, mournful roar.

Allana had been standing in the corner for a long time, watching, saying nothing. She'd had to deal with her own mother dying a few years back and watching Jaina's slow death in bed felt like an echo of Tenel Ka's. Allana knew that those women were the lucky ones; far too many of their friends and loved ones hadn't died old or in bed. She could see the pain on the young ones' faces: Roan, Nat, Kol most of all. Arlen had already lost his father, Jade both parents; their faces conveyed a grim expectancy. Allana mourned too, yet deep down a part of her was relieved that her aunt would die like this, surrounded by family.

Sekot vanished as quickly as it had appeared. After it was gone, Tahiri and Lowbacca slipped out of the damutek. Allana waited a



minute, then joined them outside. Clouds had settled over the Middle Distance, spreading a faint and formless gray in every direction. The air was cool and damp but no rain fell. It was, Allana thought, a day to fall asleep on.

Tahiri and Lowbacca were incongruous together: the tiny white-haired woman and the towering Wookiee, pelt still richly red-brown. They were the two oldest Jedi here besides Jaina. One would be joining her and Tenel Ka soon enough. The other would live for centuries yet. Allana wondered what it was like for Wookiees to outlive their loved ones again and again. She wondered if they ever got used to it.

Allana stepped up beside Tahiri and said, "Thank you for getting Jaina here as soon as possible. If not for Sekot's power..."

"I know." Tahiri looked at the blank gray sky. "I just wish... Things had gone differently down there."

Lowbacca told her it was the will of the Force, and Jaina's will, that she pass this way. Allana hoped it was true, but she also knew Kol would have a difficult time growing up with the weight of Jaina's sacrifice. She only hoped he would grow stronger for it.

Allana sighed. Just days ago, her thoughts had all been elsewhere. She, Jade, Tanith, and Lowbacca had been busily weighing options on how to fight the Sith and remove Hapes' tyrant from her throne. That weight was still on her, and it all felt compounded by her aunt's nearing death. Jaina had been a part of her life almost as far back as she could remember. She'd taken on the awful burden of killing her brother Jacen after he'd fallen to the dark, and instead of breaking beneath it she'd remained resilient. Allana had always looked to her aunt as the model of what a Jedi should be and as years passed Jaina increasingly became her only living tether to those who'd shaped her and were gone: her grandparents Han and Leia, later her mother, and in a strange way Jacen too. With Jaina nearly gone, Allana felt cast adrift just when she needed guidance.

It was all that, and worse. People she'd cared for has passed one by one, and decades had grown from decades, but Allana had never really started to feel worn down until her mother had. Tenel Ka had

spent her last years on Dathomir and seemed at peace with what she'd gained and lost, but she hadn't known her former home was under Sith domination. Knowing the whole truth just in time to watch her last link with the past forced Allana to look back on her decades as senator, Chief of State, and Jedi. She'd thought she'd done the best at every turn but for all those years she'd done nothing for Hapes. Regret piled on regret. She'd never felt so old.

Lowbacca made a low moan and looked up. Allana and Tahiri did too. They heard the drone of a starship's engines, then spotted a single shuttle, smooth-hulled and bright-red, drop out of the clouds and fall across the sky toward the city's landing zone.

"They're all here now," Tahiri whispered.

Allana turned away from the shuttle as it continued its descent. She went inside the damutek and called to Roan and Arlen, telling them that their brothers had arrived.

When Davek Fel stepped before the threshold of his mother's home there was a second where his body refused to move. On the long journey from Imperial Space to here, he told himself he could handle it. He'd survived the sudden and violent death of his father; not moved past it, exactly, or beyond it, but almost a decade's worth of days had marched on since then, one after another. They would continue for decades after this. He knew it, and he thought he'd be ready, but he wasn't.

It had been eight years since he'd seen his mother in person. He'd talked to her via holo from time to time but it wasn't the same. Time and so much more had gone between them. It had separated him from his brother as well. It had all been necessary to make the Empire strong and secure, equal and just as his father had wanted; Jaina and Arlen might not have seen it that way but he believed it as firmly as he ever had. The separation had been necessary but it still painful.

The separation beyond the door would be deeper and more final. That was why he froze; because once his mother died, the last hope of putting his family together again would go too.

But he only stopped for a moment. Marasiah was right behind him. Vitor too, and Roan, who'd come out to the landing pad to greet them along with Tahiri Veila. On the way here the old woman had explained why Davek's mother was dying and said Zonama Sekot's ruling consciousness was doing its best to keep her alive until she could say goodbye to her loved ones. Davek didn't understand that but he's never understood Sekot. Not even the Jedi seemed to. They only trusted it, like they trusted the Force.

Davek took a breath and stepped into the damutek. The light inside the domed organic building was low, and as his eyes adjusted to the gloom Davek marked giant Lowbacca first, then Allana, then Jade Skywalker and her sons, then his brother. His eyes met Arlen's from across the room; then Arlen looked down at the bed on which their mother laid.

His first thought was what she looked wasted. Holos could never fully capture the toll age took. Yet her lined face looked peaceful. All of her looked peaceful as she lay on her back, eyes closed, hands folded on the blanket pulled up to her chest. She looked dead already, but he noticed the slow rise and fall of her chest.

Lowbacca gave a sad roar. Arlen said, "The Grand Master extends his deepest sympathies."

"We're grateful. Thank you for being here," Davek said. He remembered the brown-robed Wookiee had known his mother longer than anyone in this room; maybe anyone left alive.

Vitor stepped close to the bed and stared down at his grandmother. His face was pale, his eyes sunken. Since the end of the battle at Kovix-589, something had left him deeply jarred. He said little and barely ate. He'd stare into nothing for long stretches of time, ignoring the conversation around him. Marasiah could tell he was deeply distracted by something, but he wouldn't share what. Vitor had come close to dying before but his near-execution on *Nemesis* must have rattled him more than Davek had anticipated.

"When was the last time she woke up?" Vitor asked.

"Six or seven hours," said Arlen. "She's been... in and out. Sekot's doing everything it can to keep her strong."

"We've heard," Davek said. "Is your daughter here?"

Arlen shook his head. "She's on Mandalore. Apparently. I sent her a message. She should be coming soon."

Davek could tell from his voice Arlen was worried about his daughter as much as his mother, but this wasn't the time to pry. Barring Marin they were all assembled now. Maybe Sekot would keep Jaina alive until she showed. Maybe it wasn't strong enough, and she'd slip away in her sleep. Maybe she'd dissolve before their eyes, and they'd watch together as her sheets collapsed softly on an empty bed.

There was still so much Davek couldn't know. From the looks on their faces all these Jedi who should have known didn't either. They were all keeping the same deathwatch. It strangely made him feel better.

"We heard about the big battle," Arlen said. "Is it really over?"

"The Restorationist fleet has surrendered," Davek nodded. "So have their last outlying bases. We're still making sure we've found their last nests... But yes. Essentially, it's over."

The start of that conflict had split their family apart. It had made Davek into an Emperor, his wife into Empress and First Knight, his sons into Princes. The war was over but the separation was not. They'd come too far to undo everything.

"We're very glad for you," Allana told him. "For *everyone* in the Empire. I hope... We all hope you can make an Empire your father would be proud of."

He'd never wanted anything else. "Thank you. We've heard about events in the Hapes Cluster. I assume you were involved."

"Not just me. Jade was there. So were Arlen and Nat. And Roan."

Davek looked back at his younger son. They'd barely spoken since before the Battle of Kovix-589. He was being reticent too, though he didn't seem depressed and anxious like Vitor.

"We helped your brother save lives," Roan said simply. "It wasn't planned, but... we did it."

"That's good," Marasiah said softly.

Davek looked back at Allana. "I heard the losses were very bad."

"They were. I heard yours weren't."

"That was all thanks to Vitor, really." He put a hand on his son's shoulder and squeezed, but Vitor didn't brighten.

A soft moan from the bed drew everyone's attention. Jaina's lips had creaked apart. Her eyelids twitched, then opened slowly. Her dark eyes rolled to take in Davek, Vitor, Roan, Marasiah.

"We're here now," Davek told his mother. "We made it."

"Do you want to sit up?" asked Arlen. "We'll get you some water."

Jaina nodded weakly. Arlen propped her up on the bed and Nat fetched a glass of water and handed it to her. She had the strength to clasp it and raise it to her lips, but her hands trembled. Davek knew this might be the last time his mother ever woke up.

Once Jaina drank and Nat took the cup, she looked over her assembled family again. "You said it was over," she creaked.

Davek realized she must have been listening, even when she'd seemed unconscious. "Yes. The Restorationists are finally defeated. Veers is dead and Grave is in custody. So are their other leaders. We're not sure what we'll do with all of them yet... But yes. It's done."

"And... Allana? Is it over?"

She shook her head. "No. Not even close."

"Then come closer... Both of you. Tell me."

"There's a lot to tell," Allana said.

"And I want to hear it. I'm not... gone yet." Jaina smiled weakly. "I want to know everything."

Dying was better than Jaina had thought it would be. She'd seen death come to so many others in so many ways: Anakin burning out with his own power, Jacen with his sister's lightsaber through his heart, her first wingmate Anni Captisan in a fireball over Ithor. She'd felt the death of other loved ones in the Force or learned of it second-hand: Chewbacca, Aunt Mara, Zekk, Katia, Lusa. Jagged. And a lucky few she'd watched fade out peacefully, like Tenel Ka. For much of Jaina's life, especially those early formative years, she'd been certain she'd die from a Yuuzhan Vong thud bug, a blaster bolt

or a lightsaber. She'd couldn't have imagined growing old when she was young. She'd never been able to imagine life at peace either, not for the Sword of the Jedi, and had been faintly skeptical when it had come.

Peace came and peace went, just like war. Neither lasted forever. As she listened to Allana and Davek she was reminded of what she already knew. The battle between Jedi and Sith, living embodiments of the Force and its opposing sides, had gone on for generations and could continue generations after her. And each generation would face its trials, and some would overcome, and some would not. And time would pass and generations would pass and still there would be Jedi and there would be Sith.

It was a fact that could break a person, but Jaina had endured too much to be broken by knowledge.

Once Davek had explained everything about the Empire's ending war, Allana talked about Hapes, and about the Sith. By the time they'd finished the day outside was over and the sun set invisibly behind layered clouds. Her grandchildren were hungry and restless and trying not to show it.

Jaina still had the energy to keep awake, so she said, "Everyone else.... Go on ahead. I'll be all right, for now. Davek, Arlen... Stay, please."

When the room was emptied of everyone except her sons, they both stepped close to her bed. The orange glow of the lamp carved harsh shadows on their faces. One was a Jedi Master and the other an Emperor, but their eyes were both that of frightened and uncertain children.

They tried to be strong. Arlen was worried about his daughter. Where she was, Jaina didn't know. Marin had always had a difficult path, wrested from one life and made to straddle two more. Her response had been to try and strike a unique life of her own and Jaina knew how difficult that could be for a Jedi. She knew, too, how Arlen's heart must ache knowing that his child's life was no longer in his hands.

And then there was Davek. He looked so much like his father, with the trim beard, faint scar across the forehead, and white streak

in his hair. He was one of the most powerful men in the galaxy but seemed more vulnerable than his brother. Arlen had seen other Jedi die and trusted that their souls would survive somehow in the Force. Davek could never have that certainty.

Jaina's heart ached for him. Jedi consoled themselves in thinking that their essence would never truly pass away, but they had no answer for what lay beyond life for everyone else. It pained Jaina to think her mother, Uncle Luke, Ben and Mara and her brothers all still lived through the Force while Davek, Jagged, and her father were consigned to oblivion. It was unfair, it was cruel. If part of her concrete awareness did persist after death, distinct from Luke's and Ben's and Mara's, she didn't want to spend eternity missing her father, her son, and her husband.

She didn't know, couldn't know, what would happen next. For so long that had troubled her. She'd spent hours silently pondering the fates of all her dead, wondering how much of Anakin or Jacen endured. The darkness after death sometimes seemed a deeper, more dangerous one than the Force's dark side. There could be no escape from it and no appeal. It took everyone in the end, Jedi or not. What lay in the waiting dark was a mystery she'd contemplated for ninety years.

She'd get answers very soon, once the last embers went cold. She was no longer afraid of answers. Letting go would be easy, but she wasn't ready to release, not yet. All her life she'd protected the legacy of generations past and built a new legacy for the future. She understood the coming conflict and knew she had to play her last, small part in it before the end.

"Arlen," Jaina said, "Come. Closer."

He crouched down at her side and rested one hand on hers. "What do you need?"

"You'll be going.... To Hapes. Won't you?"

"We're going to need every Jedi we can get."

"Nat?"

Arlen hesitated. "I'll let Jade decide."

"That's good." Jaina smiled weakly. "You're just his Master. Let his mother have the final say."

"Of course," Arlen laughed softly.

"But you'll take Jedi to Hapes... and Sheddu Maad. That won't be enough."

"If what Terrid said is true, we outnumber the Sith twenty to one."

"The Sith have the whole Hapan fleet."

"We can.... work around them. Somehow."

Jaina shook her head. "No. You need more than that. Davek?"

Her younger son swallowed. He saw what was coming. Davek knelt down beside Arlen. "Yes?"

"Yours fleets... They're good, aren't they? In good condition?"

"We made it through the last battle better than expected," he admitted.

"Then you know what you have to do."

"Mother it's.... It's not that simple."

"You're the *Emperor*. You're not bound by politics like the Alliance. Those ships will go wherever you send them."

"It's not just the ships, it's the *people*. I've just told them they've finished with one long war. I can't ask them to go fight another in a place we have no business in."

"The Sith helped start your war," Arlen reminded. "They're your enemies too."

Davek sighed and bowed his head. Jaina could sense his conflict. He was a good ruler thinking about the wellbeing of his people and afraid to get good soldiers killed in a war that was, first and foremost, Jedi business. But a part of him *did* want to help at Hapes. He knew all the Sith had done so far, and the threat they presented. Most of all he couldn't bring himself to reject his mother's last request. His earnest conflict ached her heart.

"Davek, please." She placed a frail hand on his as it gripped the edge of the bed. "You and your brother... If you do this together, you can win. You, him. The Jedi... the Imperial Knights."

Softly, Arlen added, "We need any help we can get."

Davek closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I need to talk this over. With Marasiah and Allana."

"You'll choose right, Davek," Jaina said. "I know it."



He nodded just a little, like he was reluctantly agreeing. Then he stood up and straightened his tunic, so Jag-ish, and left the room. Arlen watched him go but didn't move from his mother's side.

"That's a lot to ask of him," he said once his brother was gone.

"The Sith have to be stopped. And Hapes... liberated." Jaina said. "And this family... back together."

She squeezed his hand a little. Arlen squeezed back as he stared at the door as if expecting his brother to return, but Jaina knew her son's thoughts were on a different loved one, still wayward, whom he needed just as much.

Marin wanted only to leave Loracan and never return. Her escape was delayed by the injuries she'd sustained and the damage done to Mekr's ship. While she lay aboard its sick bay, getting the wound in her side patched up, her uncle flew the *Bottom Line* up to the large settlement on the planet's northern continent for repairs. Tamar piloted her daughter's X-wing and followed, leaving the wreckage of Kaynar Auch's ship behind along with the crash's sole survivor. The ship looked like its emergency distress beacons were intact. The boy could use those to summon for help. Marin prayed he did. She had enough blood on her hand already.

She knew how the Skiratas loved to celebrate a mission accomplished, but there was none of that aboard the *Bottom Line*. Everyone satisfied by the successful hunt, but it was a joyless satisfaction. They all looked at Marin with respect in their eyes, and she found that respect revolting.

There were two exceptions. After parking the X-wing next to the *Bottom Line*, Tamar went into town with Mekr to help scrounge up repair parts. Her mother was avoiding her, but Marin didn't mind. She didn't know what she'd say to her.

She didn't know what to say to Jovar either, but after she'd gotten her insides properly stitched and a bacta patch on her waist to heal the cut skin, the old Mandalorian came to see her. She'd just finished changing in a plain white jumpsuit that felt mercifully light after the *beskar'gam* she'd taken into the fight. Jovar rapped

knuckled on the door. She turned, saw him in the threshold, and still didn't know what to say.

It seemed he didn't either, not at first. Then he remembered. "I figure you'll be leaving soon."

"Yeah. I promised my dad I'd meet him on Ossus."

"Your *buir*, you tell him what you were doing?"

"What do you think?"

"Figured." The old man looked at his feet, uncharacteristically awkward. "Are you going to take Ninet's armor when you go?"

She never wanted to wear it again, but beneath initial disgust Marin knew it was a valuable tool, and more importantly her last memento of a woman she'd loved like a sister. If she left the armor here the other Skiratas would see it as a sign of disrespect to Ninet. Maybe it would be.

"I, um... I guess I'll take it."

Jovar nodded approvingly, but her discomfort was plain. "So I have to ask. You don't have to answer."

She nodded him to go ahead.

"When you fought Auchs... Did you do like I told you?"

"I tried. I really did. But I couldn't."

"You've been trained in all that. It must have come on instinct."

"No. I mean, yes, but... He almost got me. So I had to fight back, and I used whatever I had in me."

"Ah. Not the kind of tool the Jedi taught you to use, then."

"No. I never want to feel like that again. I felt..." She lowered her head in shame. "It was like you said. There was too much power in it. The wrong kind of power."

After a short silence Jovar said, "Your gear's in the main cargo room. Packed and ready."

"Thanks."

He hesitated, uncertain how to say goodbye. In the end he just nodded and slipped out of the room. Marin took her time, gathered her things, and went down to the hold. Ninet's armor was there, and the helmet Jovar had provided her. She looked down at that T-visor mask and decided to leave that, at least, behind. It wasn't Ninet's and it wasn't for her. She'd never be a Mandalorian. She

didn't want to and never had, though she'd enjoyed sometimes playing as one when she thought there'd never be a cost.

The question was whether she still wanted to be a Jedi. She'd have consider that long and hard. She'd have to talk all this over with her father. It would be an awful conversation but she couldn't hide this from him.

She took the package of Ninet's armor and carried it out of the ship. Her battered red-and-black X-wing looked the same as ever, which was a small comfort. She popped the cockpit, climbed inside, and put the armor in the storage compartment. Then she noticed the flashes on her comm signal, denoting messages received.

There were two, almost identical, though her father's words and tone were more urgent in the second. In both he explained that her grandmother was dying, and that everyone in the family was coming to Zonama Sekot as soon as possible.

When she first heard it Marin felt hollow, emptied even of regret. For all her life Jaina Solo had been many things: a loving grandmother, a stern mentor, an example of Jedi power and fortitude that inspired and intimidated at the same time. All of those were about to be erased, and when they were gone they'd take some of Marin with them.

And as her grandmother lay dying, Marin had been on the far side of the galaxy, betraying the Jedi values Jaina Solo embodied.

With that thought all the regret came flooding back, but Marin knew she needed to get moving. It was a long trip to Zonama Sekot, maybe too long to make it in time, but she had to try. And on that long solo flight there'd be plenty of hours to suffer herself alone.

She dropped out of her cockpit and jogged back to the *Bottom Line* to get food supplies for the trip. She stopped when she saw her mother halfway up the landing ramp. Tamar froze too.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Marin swallowed. "I got a message from Dad. Grandma's dying. I need to go to her."

Tamar stepped off the ramp. "How much time does she have?"

"I don't know. She's on Zonama Sekot."

Tamar winced. She knew it was a long shot and she knew Marin had to try. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could come with you. Your grandmother... I owe her more than I can say. Tell her that, if you can."

For a short time Jaina had been a second mother; even before they'd met, even before Tamar had existed, Jaina had impact her life by opening her grandfather Venku to the Force. Marin understood all that, so she nodded and said, "I'll try."

"If you can't... tell Arlen."

"Talk to him yourself. He'd like that."

"I know," Tamar smiled sadly. "I'll call him."

"You should." Marin stepped toward the ramp but stopped in front of her mother. Their eyes met; they knew there was so much more that needed to be said but no time. A guilty part of Marin was relieved.

Tamar bent forward and kissed her on the forehead. "Get what you need and go."

Marin stepped around her and hurried up the ramp. She knew her last chance to see her grandmother was already gone, but she had to try. She'd already failed too much.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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She walked in front of them with naked pride. It was expected and perhaps even deserved, but Darth Kheykid did not like it. When most Sith stepped into this high-roofed vestibule chamber and looked at the heavy stone doors behind which the Dark Lord dreamed, they felt humbled by the power that seeped through. Not so Darth Saydel. The tall black-haired human lifted her head and took long strides as she paced back and forth across the red and black stone tiles. Darth Kheykid and Darth Maleth watched her but said nothing.

When the time came, the great stone doors creaked open. Darth Wyyrlok emerged from the chamber where Darth Krayt slept. There were no mechanical controls to those doors; they could only be opened and closed with the Force. Wyyrlok shut them behind her and stepped between Kheykid and Maleth, so all three Sith Lords could face Darth Saydel.

"Lord Wyyrlok." Saydel tilted her head at the other woman. "Thank you for inviting me."

"You were summoned. Not invited."

Saydel's calm, confident smile didn't falter. "As you say. Summoned, I hope, out of gratitude?"

"The One Sith owes much to your actions," Wyyrlok said. "Without you it would have been much more difficult to purge ourselves of the traitors whose ambition outstripped their loyalty to Lord Krayt's vision."

"I was only doing my duty to my fellow Sith," Saydel said.

Kheykid wondered; he knew Maleth did too. Saydel had only come to Wyyrlok days before the Battle of Orelon, explaining how she'd encouraged Darth Terrid's rebellion as a way to draw out treasonous Sith. The two had acted in conjunction to complete the purge, but it did not change that Darth Saydel was a prideful and power-hungry woman. Kheykid didn't know whether Saydel had planned to betray Terrid all along, or whether she'd played the Chiss and Chagrian both until picking a side at the end. If Wyyrlok knew, she wasn't telling.

"Your duty does not end here," the Chagrian told her. "We must stand together, now more than ever. If the Jedi did not know of our presence in the Hapes Cluster before, they do now. They won't sit idle. The Jedi Queen will try to usurp you."

Saydel snorted derisively. "Allana Djo is an old woman. Her followers are a handful of refugees and the Alliance is too cowardly to make a stand with her. I have an entire *fleet* that will do anything I ask."

Those last words gained a dark tone. The plan she'd hatched with Terrid had involved bombing Shedua Maad to rubble with an armada of Battle Dragons. Such an attack would have ruined the One Sith, and she didn't want them to forget.

"Allana Djo's strength was never in the vermin she commanded," Darth Maleth said, "All the armies and weapons in the galaxy are less powerful than the Force. Do not forget that, Darth Saydel, and don't forget that the Jedi outnumber us twenty to one."

"We must not be blind to any threat," Kheykid added. "We also know Darth Kroan escaped Orelon. He may also be a problem."

"According to our spies," Wyyrlok said, "A figure sounding similar to Kroan was with the Restorationists when the Empire besieged them at Kovix-589."

Kheykid hadn't heard that one. "He has *Intruder*. With that ship he could escape even a siege."

"Exactly. Kroan is out there. I suspect he will continue to meddle in the affairs of vermin. He receives an easy sense of power from it, but blinds himself to the Force's true potential." Wyyrlok looked pointedly at Saydel. "Do not emulate that which you've fought."

"I have always learned from the mistakes of others," the young woman said, and in that Kheykid believed her.

"Kroan may be a threat, but our true enemy, now as always, is the Jedi," Wyyrlok said. "I have consulted with Lord Krayt. In his dreams he sees shifting visions of the future. In purging the traitors we have brought the fruition of his dreams a step closer, but obstacles remain. The Jedi will not rest. Their queen *will* make an attempt for your throne."

Saydel's confidence wilted for the first time. "Do you know what for certain?"

"Lord Krayt has seen it."

"I see. What has he seen, specifically?"

Wyyrlok stared at her blankly. Kheykid knew from years of experience that when the Chagrian spoke of her master's dreams, she shared only what she selected. Either Saydel didn't understand that or didn't care.

"If I'm to defend my kingdom I need to know how," the human pressed. "For the benefit of us *all*."

"Lord Krayt's dreams, like the future, are always changing," Wyyrlok said stoically. "The Jedi will come to Hapes. Of that I'm certain. Likely they will come to Shedú Maad. We must be prepared."

"So that's all," Saydel said, faintly bitter. "Very well. I'll use my ships to fortify Hapes and Shedú Maad both. With the loyalists crushed I don't need to spread my fleets thin."

"When the Jedi come, the Force will be your greatest weapon," Maleth reminded.

"Oh, I know." She smiled, quite sourly. "But I prefer to use every one I can."

"This is as it should be," said Wyyrlok. "But in the end we are *Sith*. The Force is the means by which we wrest our will from the universe. Do not fall into the petty thinking of the vermin or the wasteful passivity of the Jedi. In trusting the Force we trust ourselves, and that will be our key to victory."

The ship was like nothing Korosh Vull had ever seen before. The wide-stretched flying wing was just barely able to slip inside *Oathkeeper's* main hangar bay. Its hull was curved and smooth, without a right angle to be seen, and whatever black metal had been used for its hull was curiously non-reflective. Even the strong lights of the hangar seemed dull against it. Vull knew that, in generations past, stygium crystals had been used to power cloaking devices that could completely shroud ships from view. Stygium was impossible to find now, but this ship had clearly been designed as the next best thing.

Vull dragged Captain Leland and a squad of stormtroopers down with him. In the time since fleeing Kovix-589, the crew of *Oathkeeper* had fallen under his command almost pathetically fast. Their captain was young and inexperienced, and no one had any idea what to do. Just by acting like he had a clue, Vull had compelled their obedience. As he watched the black ship's landing ramp come down it occurred to him that Retor of Kuhvult- or Darth Kroan, or whatever his real name was- could just as easily force the *Oathkeeper* crew to obey him instead. He didn't have an official position among the Restorationists, not that Vull knew, but he was clearly a man who could get his way.

After all, Vull was here now, ready to greet a mysterious stranger with uncertain motives.

Only one man came down the landing ramp. He was just as Vull remembered from their brief encounter: a bald head darkened and ugly from burn scars and beneath that, formless flowing black. His robes were tattered, like he'd been in a fight. Those strange eyes, irises tinted red-gold, fixed on Vull.

He felt a shudder go down his body and resisted the urge to salute. This man was no officer and not his superior. That had to be



made clear. Arms stiff at his sides, Vull said, "Welcome aboard the *Oathkeeper*."

The man stopped a meter away from him. Gold eyes roamed across the hangar before finally stopping on Vull. "Did any others escape?"

"I do not think so. We only escaped thanks to you. You have our gratitude."

"Can we speak privately, General Vull?"

"Of course. I'll lead the way."

He wasn't enthusiastic about facing this man without his stormtrooper squadron, but it was bad form to parlay on the hangar floor. He'd thought about asking *Oathkeeper*'s crew to examine that strange ship while its owner was away but thought better of it. Its security systems were doubtless extensive and possibly lethal.

They walked in awkward silence until they reached the closest conference room. Vull and his visitor stepped inside. The door closed behind them and they were alone. Distant stars drifted out their viewport. *Oathkeeper* hung in space billions of miles from any star. Nowhere was the safest place for them to be.

"Your ship seems to be in good condition, General," the man said.

"Thank you, but it wasn't my ship. *Oathkeeper* pulled me from the battle after I was shot down."

"Ah, that's right. You took to your TIE fighter to battle the enemy directly. How... brave of you."

He said it like he knew the full story. He shouldn't have, but Vull believed he did. "You have quite a ship yourself. Did you use it to escape from *Nemesis*?"

"Yes, but only after the battle was lost to the Jedi. What do you plan to do now, General?"

"We're still assessing battle damage. Determining possibilities."

"You don't know, then."

"No," he admitted. "What are *you* going to do?"

The man gave a little sigh. "Our situations are more similar than you can realize. I came to *Nemesis* because I thought it was the last place left where I could accomplish what I wanted."

"And what is that?"

He ignored Vull's question. "*Oathkeeper* seems to last ship to carry the fire Veers and I started. A much more humble ship that *Nemesis*... But that can be a tool also."

"A tool for *what*?"

The man considered his reply for a long moment. Then he said, "Revenge."

Vull didn't revolt from the idea. Since the flight from Kovix-589 he'd had some long, grim hours to ponder his possible fate. *Oathkeeper* was one ship alone against the Empire. There were only three real options. One was to surrender and pathetically prostrate themselves before the mercy of Davek Fel and his Jedi masters. After barely escaping the battle, that option was frankly insulting to consider. A second option was to fly far from Imperial space and turn to piracy or mercenary work to survive. That would be an even greater insult to the Imperial legacy they'd fought to uphold. Doing so in a ship called *Oathkeeper* would be too bitter an irony to stand.

The third option was to do what *Voidwalker* and *Grievous* had done in their days: change history.

"What kind of revenge?" asked Vull.

"I thought that would be obvious. Against Davek Fel and the Jedi."

Vull looked at those gold eyes and knew he shouldn't trust this man. He'd appeared from nowhere, disappeared, then come again out of nothing to save them, but none of that made him trustworthy.

"Why Davek Fel?" Vull pressed. They might not be able to trust each other, but they could still use each other. "What has he done to you?"

"To me, personally?" The scarred man considered. "Far less than he's done to you. I've lost too much because of his brother, his wife, and his son. Revenge against the pretend-emperor is revenge against them. And frankly, General, I have few options left besides revenge."

Vull stared at that scarred face, the gold eyes. He believed what the man said. He still didn't trust him and never could, but he could at least know more. "You have to tell me something."

"What?"

"Who *are* you? Are your Retor of Kuhvult? Or are you this... Darth Kroan? Why are you even *here* after all this time? The whole galaxy thought you were dead."

The man's smile was bitter. "The galaxy was correct, in a way. I was Retor first but I became Darth Kroan. Do you know what that means, *Darth*?"

Vull knew Palpatine's executor had been Darth Vader. The similarity in names couldn't be mistaken, nor the fact that both these men were tall and dark, lethal and mysterious. They also said Vader had been a secret Jedi and that he'd murdered Palpatine in the end. All the more reason not to trust Kroan.

"Are you a Jedi?" Vull asked.

Still the bitter smile. "No. I am a Sith. Do you know that word?"

"Vaguely. They're the enemies of the Jedi, aren't they?"

"Palpatine himself was a Sith. He called himself Darth Sidious. Your beloved Empire was *made* to serve Sith ambition. Now it's become a vehicle for the Jedi. I cannot abide that."

It was an incredible claim, but Kroan said it so flatly, so simply, Vull found himself believing it.

"Revenge," Kroan added, "Is something the Sith value very highly."

"Are there... other Sith like you?"

"Like you, I am alone," Kroan said. It wasn't really an answer. "However, I believe you and I- you and this ship- can help each other accomplish what neither of us could alone."

"Revenge against Davek Fel."

"And changing the course of history."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Not yet. But I'm working on ideas. I need to know if your ship and crew will be part of them."

Vull looked at that scarred face, those yellow eyes, and knew he couldn't afford to trust this man. But they could use each other, and maybe even change history.

At this point, he didn't have a thing to lose.

"All right," Vull said. "*Oathkeeper* will help you."

"Thank you, General." His smile turned vicious. "You've done the legacy of Darth Sidious proud."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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Night fell and day came, and when the sun rose hidden by low clouds Jaina Solo Fel was still alive.

Kol Skywalker had spent all of that previous night lying in bed, sleepless and anxious. Nat and some of the others had taken turns speaking with Jaina alone, but Kol had not. It had been hard enough just to follow his mother into the chamber. It would be harder still to look into the eyes of the woman who'd given her life up for him. Davek and his family's arrival had made her passing all the more real, and the night afterward he'd turned and shuddered under his sheets, afraid she'd be gone in the morning. He was terrified to talk to her but he knew, even through fear, that he'd regret missing the chance to say goodbye.

Besides, he told himself, Jedi didn't give in to fear. He wasn't a Jedi yet- that was painfully clear- but he had to act like one, especially now.

So, once the Middle Distance had settled into dim daytime, Kol went to Jaina's damutek. He was a little surprised to find Empress Marasiah standing over her and talking. Kol barely knew the woman but something in her reminded him of his great-aunt.

When she saw Kol step through the door, Marasiah told Jaina, "He's here."

"Vitor?" Jaina asked.

"No," Kol said meekly and stepped around for her to see him.

She was propped up on the bed and more alert than he'd expected. Her tired face grew a little brighter when she saw him. "I'm glad you came."

"I'll leave you two for now," Marasiah said and slipped outside.

Kol froze two steps away from his great-aunt's bedside. At first all the words clogged in his throat. Then they came gushing out. "I'm so sorry. I never should have run after him, I was stupid, I—"

"Kol, it's all right," Jaina said.

The tears were coming and the boy looked down. "N-No. It's all because of *me* that you're... you're..." It was too hard to say.

"Come here," Jaina said gently. She laid a hand on the edge of the bed for him to take.

Kol shuffled two steps forward and squeezed it. She squeezed back but her grip was so weak.

"This is... not your fault," Jaina insisted. "This was my gift. To you."

Kol didn't trust himself to speak so he sniffled and nodded.

"You have many more years left than I do... And it's almost... tradition."

"Tradition?"

"Anakin gave his life for Uncle Luke. Your grandpa gave it for your mom. Skywalkers give everything for Skywalkers."

"You're a Skywalker too," Kol said. "You've always been one. The best."

"Thanks." Jaina squeezed his hand a little. "My time was... almost gone anyway, and you... You'll be a *great* Jedi. I've seen it."

"Seen it?"

"Just a little." She smiled weakly. "I saw you older. Strong, brave, handsome. And with great red hair like your grandpa."

Kol didn't know why, but he started to cry again. "I just wish... I can be as brave as you. And if I have to make a sacrifice—"

"I hope you don't."

"But if I do... I just want to be brave."

"You already are," she told him. "Just... be a little less reckless."

Apologies spilled out again. "I know. If I'd just-"

"No, Kol. We're done with that." She shook her head. "What you did... That project down there... You and Nei Rin... That can bring so much good. For everyone. It's worth protecting."

"I will," he nodded firmly. It was a duty he couldn't shirk now.

"Then keep at it." She gave his hand one more squeeze. "The future... is in your hands now."

After her son was done, it was Jade's turn. When she sat down on the stool beside Jaina's bed she did her best to sound conversational.

"So," she asked, "How did it go?"

"Fine." Jaina's smile was tired. "You've got... good kids."

"Thanks. You too."

Jaina rolled her head on the pillow to look into Jade's eyes. She seemed more alert than yesterday, and Jade prayed her strength held up until her last grandchild arrived. "What do you really want to talk about, Jade?"

Still perceptive, too. Jade sighed. "I wanted to make sure Kol is okay."

"He will be. He'll need... time."

"I know." Jade leaned forward, elbows on knees. She'd felt like a weight was bowing her shoulders ever since Terrid surrendered to her at Orelon. "I heard you made a request of your sons."

"A suggestion."

"Pretty much the same thing, isn't it? Have they... agreed?"

"I think... they're with Allana now. Talking. But you came for... something else."

All too perceptive. "I guess we should have all seen this coming. Maybe I did. What happened on Hapes forty years ago... defined my life, in many ways. I think I could handle what's ahead if it weren't for Terrid."

"Wharn," Jaina said.

"He's not the same boy you remember. Not at all. The Sith beat all the goodness out of him and made him into one of their own. All that's left is spite."

"But you'll take him... with you?"

"Nobody else knows the inside of the Sith base on Shedu Maad. We'll need to get some other guide for the Fountain Palace on Hapes. We've barely thought about that part."

"Davek will help. And his... Knights."

"Do you think cooperating on Hapes can bring the Jedi and the Imperial Knights back together?"

"I don't know. But I can hope." Jaina managed a tired smile. "That's not what worries you. Is it?"

"No," Jade sighed. "I don't trust him. I don't like him. But..."

"What?"

"I pity him. I remember what he could have been."

"So do I," Jaina whispered sadly.

"What I feel doesn't matter, though." Jade shook her head. She was talking to herself as much as her aunt. "Terrid is what Terrid is. I'm not hoping to redeem him... I'm just wondering if he might still have a role to play. If he might help the Light, despite himself."

When Jaina gave no reply, Jade looked up and saw the old woman had closed her eyes. She looked like she'd fallen back asleep. Her chest was still rising and falling with breath, very slowly. Jade reached across the bed and took her hand.

She squeezed and Jaina stirred. Her eyelids fluttered; it seemed to take effort to keep them open.

"I'm sorry." Jade drew her hand back.

"No..." said Jaina. "I was just... tired. I need help to stay awake."

Jade swallowed and wondered how much longer she'd last. "I was just... thinking out loud."

"I heard you." Jaina paused a moment to think, this time with eyes open and staring at the ceiling. "I'm not going to tell you to trust Terrid. Or try to redeem him... Though you'd be surprised who can be saved. I was... But still... you two keep getting drawn together... again and again. Unlikely... isn't it?"

"You think the Force is already at work?"

"It always is. Always. Jedi have to... trust it."

Jade thought back to that gaunt blue face, the blank red eyes that somehow communicated so much hate. "It's hard."



"You're telling me," Jaina shook slightly.

"I know you've been through so much, Aunt Jaina."

"Not that. That's all... in the past. What happens next... for me... I have to trust the Force too."

Jade felt something from her aunt, something she'd rarely found in Jaina and had, naively, not expected to feel now. It was fear. And she knew it wasn't the act of dying that worried Jaina but the uncertainty of what came after. Even for Jedi, death was a terrifying unknown.

Jade was less scared that most. Her mother's painful death had traumatized her; her father's brave sacrifice had strengthened her. Every time she dropped deeply in the Force she could feel his essence in the power that she drew. He was lost, erased from this life forever, but he wasn't gone.

"It's not the end," Jade squeezed her hand. "It's just... a transition into something else. For a Jedi like you, for someone so strong, who'd done so much, you can never pass away."

"See. Trust." Jaina smiled and faintly squeezed back. "That wasn't so hard... was it?"

For this conversation they'd retreated to the landing field and climbed aboard *Jade Shadow*. They gathered in the ship's main hold: Davek, Marasiah, Vitor and Roan watched as Allana brought the holo-projector to life and summoned a map of the Hapes cluster.

"According to Darth Terrid," she said, "Most of the Sith have occupied the former Jedi academy on Shedu Maad. We can expect Queen Serissa to be on Hapes."

"How much can you trust what this Sith tells you?" asked Marasiah.

"Jade assures us he hasn't told lies," Allana said diplomatically.

"But can you trust this isn't all part of a trap?" pressed Davek.

"If it is, it's not of Terrid's making."

"That's not the reassurance I was hoping for."

"We've suspected the Sith had a presence in Hapes for decades. We didn't know the full extent until he told us. There's no reason to doubt Darth Krayt is on Shedu Maad, or that Queen Serissa is one

of his Sith Lords. The Jedi and the Hapan exiles are going to take action no matter what. Assistance from the Empire could determine whether we succeed. Your Majesty."

Roan, who'd sitting on a side bench with his brother and watching, saw his father and Allana exchange long, hard looks. This had passed beyond a family conversation. They were talking monarch to monarch, emperor to queen, considering what this action would mean for both their peoples.

"The Imperial navy is several times larger than the Hapans," Davek said, "But if what you've said is true, Serissa has an army of fanatics willing to die for her."

"She's used terror and violence to create an ultra-loyal officer corps. Without their leader, they'd be much less dangerous."

"From what you're saying, you'd need our fleet to even *get* to Hapes."

Allana nodded grimly. "It will have heavy defenses. That's why a fleet on our side is critical. But in some ways Shedu Maad is worse."

She tapped a button on the holo-projector and the map zoomed in on the Maad system. She pointed out several gas giants, an abandoned space station, one habitable planet, and an impressive collection of navigational hazards, most notably a vast field of ice particles that allowed access to Shedu Maad only through a few narrow passages.

"You can see why the Jedi chose this place as a hideout initially," Allana said.

Davek's eyes narrowed. Roan could tell his father was calculating tactical possibilities. "Do you want the planet destroyed from orbit?"

"Darth Terrid tells us the Sith complex has military-grade shields and defenses."

"Not enough to hold back an entire siege force," Davek muttered, like he was already putting together a plan. Roan was surprised. The Empire had just finished one slog of a war and his father was readying to plunge them into another. Roan understood that he felt he owed it to his mother, but it was still an uncharacteristically rash act.

"Lowbacca is in a conversation now with K'Kruhk and the other Masters on Ossus," Allana said. "Their preferred plan is to go down to Shedu Maad and see what's there for themselves."

"Darth Krayt," Marasiah said simply.

"We want to make sure we've destroyed him this time," Allana said.

Roan had heard the story of this long-lived Sith Lord, who'd survived the Clone Wars, the Empire, the Yuuzhan Vong War, and a battle with his grandmother on this very world. It all beggared belief, but then, Roan had never faced a Sith Lord himself. Unlike Vitor and his mother, he'd never experienced their power firsthand.

As he watched his father's thoughtful face, Roan realized that was about to change.

"What about the Imperial Knights?" he asked. "What would *our* part be?"

He looked from his father to his mother to Allana. It was Marasiah who said, "The Imperial Knights have always been the Empire's vanguard. And if our real enemy is the Sith, then it's all the more important we act."

"Does that mean we rejoin the Jedi?" Vitor asked with a slight tremble in his voice.

It was the first thing he'd said in hours. Since their reunion, Roan's older brother had hardly spoken at all. He seemed anxious, distracted, for what reason Roan didn't know. It wasn't mere grief for their dying grandmother. Something had been wrong with Vitor ever since the storehouse raid on Lantilles. Roan had gently prodded his brother and been quietly rebuffed. He told himself that once Jaina had passed, that dreaded and awaited moment over, he'd pin Vitor down and find out what was really going on.

"The Imperial Knights," Davek said. "Are a critical piece of what our Empire *is*. You're not just our vanguard, you're our symbol and our anchor." He looked at Allana. "We're sorry to disappoint the Grand Master, but we can't allow our Knights to simply... merge with the Jedi."

Allana seemed to have expected that. "All we're asking for is cooperation."

They were both using a royal *we*, Roan thought. Even in a time of personal crisis they both retained their royal dignity. He admired that.

"Cooperation is possible," his father allowed. "The Sith are our enemy just like they are yours. The Knights will join your strike teams."

"Shedu Maad and Hapes?"

He nodded. "What kind of attack are you planning on Hapes?"

"We'll remove the queen. That means going to the Fountain Palace." She tapped the holo again and brought up a rotating view of a very fine stone building with multiple domes and towers clustered together. It was situated on a hilltop and one side sloped toward an elegant city; the other plunged down a cliff into an ocean.

"This is a file image," Allana said, faintly wistful as she looked at the place where she'd grown up but hadn't seen in almost forty years. "Unfortunately, our best knowledge on its insides is decades out of date. We're looking into how we can remedy that."

"What about the loyalists you rescued from Orelon?" asked Marasiah.

Allana shook her head. "The few nobles we did manage to save kept holdings on other planets. They've only ever been visitors to the Fountain Palace."

Roan's mouth slipped open, then snapped shut. He was about to tell Allana that wasn't true, that Elliah Chalk and her brother had grown up there and even if their knowledge was a little out-of-date it was the best available. He hesitated because he knew those two had been through so much trauma already and didn't want to see them go through more, Elliah especially. Still, their guidance might be necessary. Maybe later he'd bring it up, if his parents really did commit their Knights to this mad mission.

"Our goal is to reach the queen," said Marasiah. "Do we kill her?"

Allana nodded gravely and tapped the holo-projector again. The new image was a head-and-shoulders shot of a very regal, very attractive woman with night-black hair. Roan had never realized Serissa was so young, probably just a little older than Vitor. He felt his brother tense beside him and looked askance to see his face had

gone paler than before. He trembled, very slightly. Roan sent him a gentle probe in the Force but he clammed up entirely.

"She's too dangerous to be taken alive," Allana was saying, "We've been told there are small children being trained by the Sith on Shedu Maad. One reason we'd like to go down there is to try and rescue them. They don't deserve to die because of who their masters are. As for Hapes, the Fountain Palace has lasted for hundreds of years. It means legitimacy for whoever's inside. It's a symbol we don't want to destroy."

Roan understood her *we* meant the Hapan exiles this time. "You just need to kill the queen," he said simply.

Allana nodded. "It needs to be done to free Hapes from the Sith. That's why I'll be part of that strike team."

"You?" Roan blinked. "Isn't that..." He didn't want to say that she was too old for such a dangerous fight.

"The Sith have occupied my home for thirty-seven years," Allana said darkly. "It's my duty as queen to end it. You understand that, don't you, Your Majesty?"

She looked back to Davek, who nodded slowly. "I think I do. Your Majesty."

"Then you understand why we need your help."

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them. "Very well. The Empire will step up where the Alliance has not and liberate Hapes from its tyrant. The Jedi and Imperial Knights will fight together again."

Since the end of the battle aboard *Nemesis*, Vitor felt like he was experiencing the revelation of his death all over again. After the dream he'd passed through constant dread into a weird exhilaration that had led him- boldly, madly- to sneak aboard the enemy flagship confident in his invincibility. That confidence had nearly gotten his mother killed, and when the fight ended he'd learned that his grandmother was dying and been whisked away on the long flight to this half-mythic living planet he'd heard of but never set foot on.

To him it was just another planet: green hills, gray skies, but no enlightenment and little hint of the great Force power it was supposed to wield. For Vitor, everything had been reduced to the narrow point of his waiting death. Even the death of his grandmother, who'd done so much to train him in his early years, was shadowed by his selfish grief.

That had all been before he sat down with his family and Allana and watched them discuss an invasion of Hapes. Since Jaina had made the request of her father his dread had been rising, and when Allana had shown them the holo of Hapes' Sith Queen all the vicious uncertainty of the past few weeks vanished. Finally, he knew exactly when, where, and how he was going to die.

And at the very start, as he'd looked at the familiar face of the woman who'd kill him, he actually felt relief. He *knew*, and no longer had to fear each sunrise might be his last.

But relief died fast. By the end of his family's conversation he'd stopped paying attention entirely. As he stared at his parents he was overwhelmed by the enormity of what destiny had stolen from him. He would never be Emperor and would never shoulder the responsibility of leadership. Much worse, he'd never have a family of his own. No sons, no daughters to pass on his legacy. He'd never have a wife. He'd been training and fighting for so long that he'd never had a chance fall in love and now he was certain he'd never get the chance to win someone's trust and affection and build a new life in partnership. He'd never feel her touch his face warmly or feel her teasing, tickling whisper in his ear. Love did not exist, the woman did not exist. Life and a future did not exist, not for Vitor Fel.

And as he looked around the interior of *Jade Shadow* he thought of all the other things, the meager-seeming things he *did* have, that would all be wiped away: the familiar pressure of his lightsaber in his palm, the geography of tiny nicks and scratches on the red armor he'd worn for years, the way he arranged the shelves in his quarters on Bastion and the view he woke up to on the lucky mornings he spent at home. The eagerness of his cousin Mohrgan, the admiration and intimidation Roan felt toward his big brother

and tried to hide. The guidance of his parents, exemplars in their own ways. Marin, absent Marin, with whom he'd shared so much and once assumed he'd share a future too. That future was already gone, and it had hurt when he'd lost it, but he felt that hurt anew, strongest of all the coming losses that were piling on to crush him.

When the talk was over Vitor excused himself and avoided questions. He went out of the ship, across the landing field, into the Middle Distance where strange organic buildings were populated by strange beings he couldn't sense in the Force. He ignored all the wonders and marched out of the city, into the forested hills where he could be alone.

Tall bora trees cast cool shadows, further darkening the gloom from the overcast sky. Vitor paced tight circles around their trunks. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry.

He settled for calling out for the planet's supposed consciousness. He tilted his head back and bellow at the trees, "Where are you? I need *help*! Tell me how I'm supposed to handle this! Tell me how I'm supposed to *march* in there and *die*!"

No answer. Birds and faint wind rustled the trees high above, but nothing moved around him.

"I didn't *want* this!" He shouted again. "Can't you help me? Can't you *change* this? I'll do anything you want! Anything! Just help me! I could do so much more! *So much*! I don't want to die! Help me!"

When he was out of breath he sunk to his knees. He couldn't stop his hands from shaking until he curled them into fists and pounded the dirt. It was damp and soft beneath his knuckles and he pounded and pounded like that would raise the planet's reply. And when he was exhausted he sank back and looked around the dark forest and still he was alone. Hatred washed over him, resentment toward this silent world and the Force itself, the great and silent power that had given him everything and took it away without reason or apology.

The Force never explained itself. It merely *was*, and it willed what it willed, and not even the Jedi who swore obedience to that

will could ever explain it. It had never seemed more cruel. He'd never hated the Force until now.

When the day waned and the forest floor darkened, Vitor finally rose from the dirt. He brushed brown off the shins of his trousers. He stood in place and looked in all directions. The layered tree-trunks seemed a maze of shadows and he didn't know which way he'd come. Reluctantly, bitterly, he reached out with the cruel and awesome power he'd been given, sensed the fleeting lives of his family in one direction, and started toward them.

He didn't go into the Middle Distance until night fell. He didn't want to explain what he'd been doing or talk to his brother or parents. There was only one person he could speak with who might understand. While yesterday everyone had spent together, gathered around his grandmother's bedside, today she'd received a series of quiet visits, one person at a time. When he came to her damutek he found Jaina's friend Tahiri sitting cross-legged on the stoop, body buried in brown robes. When Vitor approached she lifted her eyes.

Vitor started, "Is my grandmother..."

"She's resting. She doesn't have any visitors right now."

"Is she awake?"

The old woman looked at him, considering something, he didn't know what. In this darkness she couldn't see his face. His Force-aura might be telling something else.

But in the end, she unfolded her legs and stood up. "Go ahead, Vitor," she said, and walked off into the night.

He hesitated for just a second, then walked into the dark damutek. There was one lamp, a real flame, trembling in the corner of the room. Its unsteady light spread across the low dome of the roof and by it Vitor could see his grandmother's face. Jaina was lying flat but her dark eyes were narrowly open. She shifted her head to watch him as he sat down on the stool beside her bed.

"Hi," Jaina said, very faint.

"Hello," Vitor said.

"You took... your time."

"I'm sorry. I just had... a lot to think about."

"I know."



He leaned forward in the dark. "You *know*?"

"Everyone... could tell." A brittle smile. "I'm not dead yet."

She didn't know everything. Maybe she had a hint. As he hunched forward Vitor's hands clasped tight together. He tried to think of what he'd planned to say but nothing came.

"Vitor," she asked softly, "What *is* it?"

He only had to get it out. He took a ragged breath and said, "I'm going to die."

She looked at his shadow-shrouded face and waited.

He said, "I've seen it in the Force. I'm going to be killed on Hapes by Queen Serissa."

"In a vision?" Jaina whispered.

"A dream. That's how I've always gotten them and they've never been wrong."

"Vitor... The future-"

"Don't tell me it's always in motion. Please. *Mine* isn't. Every one of my dreams has come true. The very first one- the first one I remember anyway- I got right before Veers attacked the academy on Bastion. And we fled, and the Sith came after us and almost killed us both. We fought them in the rain. I saw that in a dream the night before it happened. I thought it was just a nightmare then, but it wasn't."

He thought she'd try to argue with him more. He'd even *wished* it, on the chance she'd have a compelling argument against destiny that hadn't occurred to him. His heart fell when she whispered, "I'm so sorry, Vitor."

"I just... don't know what to do. I haven't told anyone else. I *couldn't*. I just wish I'd never had that damned vision. I shouldn't have to *know* I'm going to die."

Softly she said, "Everyone dies, Vitor."

"But not like this. I could do so much more, *be* so much more."

He could be an Emperor, a leader and a hero. He could grow old with his brother. He could fall in love, share that love, and make new life with it. The last one seemed to hurt the most. He'd been so occupied by war and duty all these years he'd put aside what he

might want for himself in the blind believe he'd have it later. The Force had cheated him. He'd cheated himself.

Slowly, considerately, Jaina said, "My brother Anakin was younger than you when he died. And I've spent so much time thinking about him. The life he should have had. What else he could have accomplished. How he could have changed the galaxy."

"He did change the galaxy," Vitor said. "He saved the whole Jedi during the Yuuzhan Vong War. That's what you told me."

"And it's true." Her hand reached out across the bed and he took it. "Anakin deserved so much more than he got... but he left a *beautiful* legacy. His legacy is us. That's what made him great. Being a Jedi... is as much about how we face death as how we face life."

"They say there is no death. Only the Force." He didn't want to say how he felt about the Force right now.

"That saying holds true... from a certain point of view."

"I never liked those ones." Vitor said. "You know Jedi who've survived in the Force after dying. You've talked to them. Maybe you're not afraid because you'll get to be a blue ghost with your brothers but what about *me*? I'm no Jedi Master. I'm not even a Jedi. I'm an Imperial Knight. I barely know what that means. Roan *thinks* he does..." He shook his head. "When I die, I don't know I'll still be there. I don't know *anything*. And please, *please* don't ask me to trust the Force. Because I can't do that, not after what the Force did to me."

When his outburst was done he lowered his head. Jaina made no reply. When her grip on his hand weakened, Vitor looked up. She was still staring at him.

Silence dragged for another long moment. Then she said, "When your grandfather got older... he was so concerned about his legacy. You know your father cares too. His legacy and Jag's."

"They both accomplished so much. I've just—"

"Anakin was just sixteen. His legacy was... as great as anyone's. A legacy isn't about *time*." She squeezed his hand. "Everybody... runs out of time too soon. Whatever happens on Hapes... Whatever happens to you in the Force... You won't really be gone."

Ever. Not to your parents. Not to Roan and Marin. Just... care about what you'll leave behind. It's always more than you think."

Jaina was right. Of course she was. Death had made him selfish, unlike her. He'd barely given any thought on what this would mean to his parents, his brother, the sister he'd almost had. He needed to make sure they'd be ready to carry on without him. He didn't know how yet. He still didn't think he could look his parents in the eye and tell them of his vision. But it was a start. For the short time left he could live with determination instead of grief.

He felt her pressure on his hand and her touch in the Force. Weak as she was, she tried to pass on warmth and strength. He squeezed back and touched back. Tears caught in his eyes but he blinked then down rather than wipe them away.

"Thanks, Grandma," Vitor whispered.

"Don't mention it," she whispered back, and pulled her hand away.

Some time in the middle of the night, well after Vitor had left and she'd drifted off to sleep, Jaina found herself awake again and looking out the window. From her bed she could see just a thin sliver of sky, and for the past few days there'd been nothing but gray daytime and pure-black night. When she noticed starlight outside she barely believed it. She stayed in bed, eyes open. She watched those stars and noticed the very gradual creep of color into the surrounding black. Dawn was coming. It would be a clear, bright sunrise.

She found strength she hadn't known in days. She pushed herself upright in bed. She slid out from the covers very slowly, put her feet on the ground, and shakily stood. She found her shoes, slipped them on, and walked into the predawn light.

The air was cool and damp and smelled like the forest. She'd always loved the way Zonama Sekot smelled. It reminded her of Yavin 4, and the times she'd woken early and climbed up to the top of the Massassi temple and sat on its ancient stone edge to watch new daylight burn sheets of mist from the surrounding jungle. Sometimes her brothers had been with her, or Lowie or Zekk or

Tenel Ka. Sometimes she'd been alone. No matter what, it had been a beautiful way to start a day.

It got easier to walk. Jaina couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so light. She climbed her familiar hill with the sunrise view. She found her familiar bench and sat down on it. From here she could see all the domed buildings and corkscrew spires of the Middle Distance, and the tree-lined ridges on the other side, and horizon beyond them all. The cloudless sky was burning gold and she knew the sun would be up in minutes.

"You got here just in time," said a voice beside her.

Jaina looked to her left and saw her brother Anakin. For some reason she wasn't surprised. Nor was she surprised to hear Jacen say, "We kind of guessed you'd want to be here for this."

Jaina looked to her right and there he was. Jacen was as she'd last seen him, before his second death here on Zonama Sekot. There was a weary peace in his dark eyes, his pale face and grim smile. When she looked at him she also saw all the other Jacens she'd known: the man darkened by forbidden love and secret drives; the questing, questioning youth; the goofy boy who kept his room stuffed with animals and always timed his bad jokes perfectly. She looked back to Anakin. He was as she'd last seen him too, a mere teenager (he'd never seemed quite so young in memory); small and smooth-faced but with grief and determination in his ice-blue eyes. And she saw the rest of Anakin as well: the quiet lonely boy, the curious tinkerer, the little brother she'd always done everything to protect.

As Jaina sat between them she no longer felt like an old woman incongruous against those died young. The ache and weakness and limitation of her body dissolved like dew in sunlight. She felt neither young nor old, not bound by years or flesh. She was simply Jaina, and Anakin was simply Anakin, and while Jacen had never been simply anything he was only now himself.

"Sorry about the wait," she told them.

"We didn't mind," Anakin said.

"We figured you deserved to take your time," added Jacen.

"I was... hoping I'd get a little longer. There was someone else I needed to talk to. One more thing I needed to do."

"There always is," said Jacen. "That's life."

Her brother would know better than anyone, she thought. He seemed content now, in a way he'd almost never been in life.

Jaina looked across the valley to where the sun's bright disc crept above the treetops. Soon it would raise mist from the forest like sunrise on Yavin 4, but even with her brothers beside her she found her thoughts drawn to another dawn. She thought back to the sole morning she'd seen on Tatooine, when she'd watched both discs chase away the nighttime cool and wipe every shadow from the vast open desert. That had been right after she'd dropped into the sand the weapon she'd made herself and fought and killed with, the one whose violet blade she'd driven through her brother's heart. It was only when she'd released it that she'd finally felt free of the destiny her uncle had placed on her long ago. No longer Sword of the Jedi, just herself, she'd watched Tatooine's double-dawn and felt like she was starting everything anew. That was what she felt now: the sweetest of reliefs.

As the sun rose higher, more than half its disc in view, she asked, "What happens now?"

"It's a little hard to explain," said Anakin. "It'll be better if we just show you."

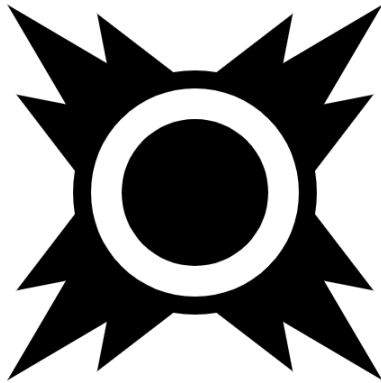
"Are you ready?" Jacen asked softly.

"Just give me a minute," she whispered.

Jaina waited and watched until the sun cleared the horizon. Its red blaze was fading to white as the gold sky cooled to blue. It was going to be a beautiful day.



# PART IV



WHAT YOU LEAVE BEHIND





## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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After the first clear dawn following many days of gray, Arlen Fel went to his mother's damutek and found her bed empty. He called on the rest of his family to search the surrounding area, but they all knew what had happened.

As the sun rose higher and the day got warm and bright, everyone found their own way of accepting what had happened. Kol Skywalker watched his family process it. The loss had been clearly coming but her disappearance still seemed to shock Nat. He was old enough to remember the death of their father but that was half a life ago, and he'd not suffered a major loss since. Jade became pensive, though Kol sensed his mother's thoughts had drawn away from Jaina to something else.

And as for Kol himself, he found he was okay with it. Not happy, but not wracked by guilt and self-blame like he'd been before. If anything, he felt a little relieved it was over. When he'd spoken with Jaina before there's been no recrimination from her. She'd even seemed thankful for the chance to save him, despite what it had cost her.

He was okay with it, more or less, but he still wanted to be alone. The boy decided to wander the woods that were so familiar to him. He took his familiar path up one of the eastern hills, but

when he reached the crest he stopped. He hadn't expected to see Nei Rin sitting there, alone on a boulder, facing the city and facing him. The Yuuzhan Vong girl didn't seem surprised to see him.

"Did you know I'd come this way?" he asked as he stepped up to her.

She shook her head. "No. But I thought you might. I've heard Master Solo has passed. My condolences."

He hadn't seen her since he'd burst out of that shapers' lab and nearly gotten himself killed. He'd heard she'd been sent back north but either he'd been avoiding her or she'd been avoiding him. Probably it was both. They both had too much on their minds.

"I should have tried harder to stop you," Nei Rin said. "Perhaps things would be... different."

"I doubt it. I wasn't in the mood to be stopped."

"Still. I am sorry."

"Ah, Nei Rin, it's not your fault."

They stood apart and looked down at the city. The sun gleamed bright off every dome and spire and lit on every tiny figure moving in the streets. Everything seemed so vivid today, so full of life. The breeze that blew across the hilltop was wet and warm and gentle.

"What happened after... everything?" Kol asked. "I never heard."

"The man who shot you was captured. We investigated. It seems he was working alone, with an extremist group who wish to destroy my people. We have given him to the Alliance for punishment."

"You mean the Yuuzhan Vong and the Jedi? Are they sure the Alliance to do it right?"

"This cooperation was meant to build trust. It still might."

It was something his grandmother would approve of, Kol thought, assuming the Alliance dealt out real justice. "What about the research?"

"The others are still down there." Nei Rin lowered her head. "They decided that... children no longer had a place."

After a moment Kol said, "They're probably right."

"This is true." Breath hissed between her teeth. "We should never have gone."

"Maybe. But if we hadn't that guy might have cooked up something as nasty as Alpha Red to use against your people. And that would be even worse. My great-aunt... I think she was okay with what happened in the end."

Nei Rin nodded. "I'm glad. You know my people value sacrifice. The *Jeedai* willingness to give of themselves was what impressed so many of us generations ago."

Kol knew her people believed their god Yun-Yuuzhan had created the universe by dismembering himself. It was a grisly bit of theology, and one that remained despite some other adjustments to the Yuuzhan Vong pantheon. Tahiri insisted that, for all its strangeness, their religion pointed to many of the same essential truths as the Jedi's belief in the Force. Sacrifice was one; the contribution of the dead to a greater future was another.

"She said we shouldn't stop," Kol told Nei Rin. "I mean, not that *we* should go back there to the labs. Just that... what we've been doing is important. We shouldn't give up on it."

The Yuuzhan Vong girl finally seemed to brighten. "I am glad to hear that, *Jeedai*."

The silence that followed was more comfortable than before. As they looked out on the village Kol spotted a small dark shape cutting through the sky. It slowly got closer and bigger and he marked the flying trident as a starfighter coming in to land.

"Do you know that ship?" asked Nei Rin.

"Not exactly," Kol said. "But I think someone's come a little late."

By the time Marin set her X-wing down on the landing field, she knew her grandmother was dead. She didn't know how she knew; she'd felt no sudden pang in the Force to announce Jaina's passing. As she neared the end of her long, long journey through hyperspace from one side of the galaxy to the other, the knowledge simply settled deep inside her.

Even as she opened her cockpit and descend the ladder to the grassy field, she allowed that hope that her knowledge was just unwarranted pessimism. Then she saw her father waiting for her,

and she saw his face, and she knew for certain that she'd arrived too late.

At that moment Marin forgot about Loracan and the weight of expectation that had been crushing her on the long flight to Zonama Sekot. She clasped her father in a tight embrace and said, "I'm so sorry, Dad. I wish I could have gotten here sooner."

"It's okay. I know you tried." Arlen released her and explained, "She just passed overnight."

She'd been close, then. It made her feel worse. As they started toward the town she asked, "Did everyone else get here in time?"

"Pretty much. I brought everyone I could from Ossus. Your uncle and his family came from Imperial Space."

"Vitor?"

"He's okay. He found the Restorationist stronghold like he'd planned. Davek was able to force most of them to surrender with relatively low casualties."

"You mean that war is over?"

"Yes. It's *really* over this time."

"That's great news." Arlen didn't seem in a hurry to ask what had happened to her. She wasn't in a hurry to answer. "How... was it? In the end?"

Arlen searched for words. "It was... peaceful. She was in and out of consciousness those last few days, but she was lucid. People got to say goodbye."

She remembered what else her father had told her. "How are Kol and Nat doing?"

"I think they're okay. Kol's doing better now than he was at the start. As for Nat... He'd having it a little rougher. But I'm sure he'll pull through. He's been waiting on you to show up."

Marin felt a pang of guilt for having an admirer. She'd never felt less deserving of one. She had never been to Zonama Sekot before and she tried to distract herself with her strange new surroundings. The Yuuzhan Vong on the streets seemed disarmingly normal. The town's organic domes and corkscrew spires were distinctly alien and she struggled to think of a comparison. As for a whiff of that

planet's living awareness, she felt none, but she hadn't been expecting to. She didn't deserve to feel it.

After a long walk in silence Arlen announced, "We're almost at your grandmother's place. There should be a lot of people there."

"That's fine," she said. Things left unsaid had been getting heavier as they walked and she ventured, "Did you get a call from Mom?"

Arlen nodded. "I was surprised, but she said you'd told her what happened and insisted she call."

"That's basically how it went." Marin ventured a little more. "What did she say?"

"It wasn't a long call, but she sent her condolences. It was good."

If it was a good call then Tamar certainly hadn't told him about Ninet and Loracan. There was the hint of a question in her father's tone, but nothing more. Soon they were approaching Jaina's home, and she spotted Nat and Jade loitering outside it, accompanied by a small white-haired old woman and a towering Wookiee.

The Grand Master was the first to spot Marin and he trilled loudly at her. When her cousin spotted her his eyes lit up. Another round of greetings followed: firm hugs with Nat and Jade, a gentler one with Tahiri, a polite bow to Lowbacca.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't get here in time," she told them.

"It's all right," Tahiri smiled weakly. "She knew you tried."

"Thanks," Marin sighed and gave Nat a pat on the shoulder. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm holding," he shrugged.

"I heard you got into some heavy stuff in the Hapes Cluster. A rescue mission, wasn't it?"

"Jade needed help with some evacuations and Nat took charge of the situation," Arlen said. "Even those Imperial Knights and Princes started taking his orders."

"Impressive," Marin said, which made the teenager flush a little. She'd always known Nat did well under pressure. "Speaking of Imperial royalty, where's Vitor and the others?"

"They want back to the *Shadow* with Allana," Jade explained. "There's a lot they need to talk about."

"What do you mean?"

Lowbacca gave a roar and gestured to the damutek.

"He's right," Arlen said. "You'd better come inside. There's a lot you've missed."

Marin followed her father and the others inside the low domed building. It felt a little strange to be in the room her grandmother had died in. There was an empty, neatly-made against once wall as a reminder of her absence but the others, who'd been keeping vigil here over the past several days, didn't mind. If anything it seemed to them a welcome reminder of her.

There were enough chairs and stools for everyone except Arlen to sit down. He didn't mind; standing next to Lowbacca he dove into it all, explaining the last request Jaina had made of her sons and Davek's pledge to use Imperial ships and Imperial Knights to help the Jedi liberate the Hapes Cluster from the Sith who'd been camped there for forty years and, more incredibly, managed to install one of their own as queen.

It was a lot to take in, but as she listened to the explanation Marin realized that this massive undertaking would require as many Knights as possible. That would mean her and her father and Jade; it might mean Nat too. It would certainly mean Roan and Vitor.

She'd never expected the Fel family to come together like this. After so many years apart, she'd never expected a reunion at all. It would be a dangerous undertaking but that they'd all be in it together gave her a faint feeling of hope, the first hope she'd had in what seemed like forever.

Arlen was finishing his explanation when Allana and the rest of the Fels stepped through the door. The room suddenly felt packed with people but Marin's eyes went straight to Vitor, who hung behind his father near the doorway.

Another round of welcomes followed, more formal than before. After that Davek and Allana explained a few more details of their planned campaign in the Hapes Cluster. Marin barely listened. She and Vitor stayed near opposite walls but they watched each other all the while. Neither had forgotten that they'd promise to share

everything once that mission to Hutt Space was over. At the time Marin had never imaged what she'd have to tell.

At the end of the talk Davek said, "I'd like to leave for Bastion at by nightfall. There's a lot of preparations to be made."

Lowbacca roared and Arlen said, "Same here. We'll head out for Ossus then too."

"I'm glad you can all be here together for today," Tahiri said. "And I know it means so much to Jaina in the end, having you here, especially when so much else was happening."

"It was the least we could do," Jade said.

"I hope you'll at least all have one last meal here, together. As a family."

"I think that's a wonderful idea," said Allana.

"We just need to find my kid brother," Nat said, grouching.

The groups started to splinter after that. Once Marin saw her opening, she slipped across the room to Vitor. He watched her, said nothing, and walked outside for her to follow.

Once they were alone Marin forgot what she'd planned to say. Vitor walked fast and she hurried to keep up. He led her up a hill, up toward the forests that surrounded the town. The high bora trees that thick trunks and multicolored leaves that took a strange rainbow shimmer in the mid-afternoon light.

Vitor led her beneath the canopy to a place of dappled shadows that shifted with the breeze. "Is there a place you want to go?" she asked.

Vitor halted. She stopped a meter behind him and looked at his back. His head bent low and his hands balled into fists and even with the Force she still couldn't get a good read on what he was feeling.

"Hey, Vitor," she said softly. "I know you've been through a lot, but... You promised to explain why you were avoiding me before, remember?"

"I'm not avoiding you now."

"No. You've just got your back turned and refuse to look at me."

He turned. He looked at her. "I haven't told anyone else yet. Except for Grandma."

Something in his voice chilled her despite the warmth of the day. "What's going on, Vitor?"

"I don't think I ever told you, but for a long time I've been getting glimpses of the future. The Force sends them in my dreams."

"I know. You told me about the one you had when Veers first attacked the academy on Bastion. You saw yourself and Grandma fighting Sith in the rain."

Vitor blinked in surprise; he hadn't remembered himself. "I've been having more. And they've all come true."

She could feel the dread in her voice and she steeled herself. "Did you have a dream with me in it?"

"Yes. Right before we met on Lantilles." He took a breath. "You're going to be with me when I die. Queen Serissa is going to kill me."

She wasn't ready for that. She couldn't be. She stared at his face and saw utter grim certainty. "Vitor... No... You've got to be remembering something wrong—"

"I know you'll be there. I remember your face. And I remember *her* face. Allana showed us her holo and it's the same woman as my dream. I'd never seen her before that. She's got a double-sided lightsaber and she's going to spear me right through the heart." He gently touched his chest.

She groped for something to say, something to believe. "The future... Vitor, Jedi get visions of the future all the time, but there's not just *one* future. It changes. Allana's dad thought *he* saw the future and he—"

"I'm not going to do what he did," Vitor said. "I'm not going to try and change it. I *can't*."

"Dammit, you don't know that!"

"Back at Soergg's palace, I was terrified. And I think I *wanted* to die back there, just to get it over with. I left myself open for it, but it didn't come. And then I got on that shuttle for *Nemesis* because I figured..." He sighed. "I thought I was invincible. Or maybe I was trying to tempt fate. There were points on *Nemesis* where I *should* have died, but I didn't. Because that wasn't my destiny."



"*Shab* destiny. What do you plan on doing? Just going down to Hapes and asking her to kill you? You want to drag me along for that?"

"No."

"Then don't go. Tell your parents. They'll understand."

"What am I supposed to do, sit in a locked room on Bastion when everyone I love goes off to fight and maybe die? I'm not a coward."

She winced. "I never thought you were. Ever."

"I'm an Imperial Knight and a Prince. If I'm not going to live like one, then what's the point of living at all?"

She was shocked how insistent he was on dying. He wasn't happy for it. He'd opened himself in the Force like he'd opened his words, and she could feel how terrified he was. Yet despite his fear, he was resolute.

"Vitor, if you go to Hapes thinking you're bound to die, then you will. You can't just resign yourself. You have to *fight*. Force visions are wrong all the time."

"Mine never are."

"*Osik*. There's a first time for everything."

"Not this."

"Dammit, stop talking like that!" She shouted. "You've got people who care about you! Lots of people! Do you want to look Roan and your parents in the eye and tell them you're ready to die? Do you?"

He stared at her. "Marin..."

She realized she was crying and wiped her cheeks dry. "Don't do this to me, Vitor. Please. I don't want to lose anybody else."

"What do you mean?"

She took a deep ragged sigh and looked away. She looked at the lights and shadows, the pillars of the bora trunks and the luminous canopy. When she glanced back at Vitor he still had the question on his face.

He'd unburdened to her. It was only fair she did the same. So she did. She started at the beginning, with what she'd never told him. She began with the death of Gevern Auchs on Chorax and

took it to his brother's death on Loracan, both by her hand, and she ended with the nameless little boy- Kaynar's son, probably- she'd let live after she killed his father with the Dark Side of the Force. As she described the look in that boy's eyes- the fear and absolute hatred- she could see it as though he was still in front of her.

And when Marin was done she looked down and waited for Vitor to speak. It took him a long, long time to find something to say.

"Do you still want to be a Jedi?" he asked.

"I don't know. I thought I could be... a different kind of Jedi. My kind of Jedi. And for a while I thought I could do that, and I thought nothing could ever come back to hurt the people important to me." Her voice trembled. "I was really wrong."

"You didn't mean for that any of that to happen. Not to Ninet. Not even to Auchs."

"Not to Gevern. I was just... defending my mom. But his brother... I wanted to kill the bastard. I wanted to make him hurt before he died. And I did. I wasn't being a Jedi then. I was... something else, something I never thought I could be. I don't want to be that thing again, Vitor. If you die too..."

He understood and the sadness deepened in his eyes. "I wish I can promise you I could change things..."

"You have to try. Please. And... let me help you."

"Then you'll come with me to Hapes?" There was a little hope in his voice.

"Yeah, but not to watch you die. I'll find a way to save you. I promise."

She had to do it; as much for her as for him. Vitor nodded, sadly, not quite convinced. "I'd like for you to come. And maybe you'll really do it."

"You're damn right I will," she sniffed. "What's a Jedi for if she can't save the people she cares about, huh?"

"So you *do* think you can be a Jedi? Still?"

She looked down at the lightsaber hooked to her belt. She knew she wouldn't need it here, but she'd still put it on before leaving her X-wing. Maybe that was force of habit, maybe something deeper.

"I hope I can be one. There's this... old man on Mandalore. My mom's uncle. He got the Force from his Jedi grandmother and he even used it a little when he was young, but he swore it off. Totally. He said he didn't like using a tool he couldn't trust."

"The Force is more than just a tool."

"I know. But... can you trust it?"

She let him think hard about that. Eventually he said, "I don't know. Aren't Jedi supposed to trust the will of the Force?"

"We are."

"Can *you* do it?"

She felt the memory of black anger, the joyful surge of hate that had come out of her depths. "I don't know. But I want to try."

"That's good, Marin."

"Fierfek," she laughed, dry and bitter. "What else could I be if I'm not a Jedi, right?"

She didn't mean for him to answer and he didn't. He looked into the forest's shadowed distances and said, "After I got that vision... I felt like I was staring at death for so long, like I was looking for some answer. But there was nothing. It was just this... waiting darkness, and not like darkness in the Force. There's power in that. Death is just... blackness. A void."

"They say there's no death, only the Force." Marin felt strange quoting the Jedi code.

"But what does that *mean*? Grandma's body disappeared when she died. And I'm sure she's still... in it, somehow." He waved a hand at this forest, this supposedly ghost-haunted world. "But I'm not a great Master. I'm not even a Jedi. I've seen Imperial Knights die. Too many. They all left corpses. Are they still alive in the Force?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry... That's beyond me."

"I know. And I went to Grandma. I think... I was the last one she talked to before she died." She let him pause and gather himself. "Death wouldn't give me an answer. I thought maybe she would. She didn't know what was ahead of us either, but she was so much braver."

"She'd seen a lot more of it than your or me."

"She talked about her little brother, Anakin. The one who died in the Yuuzhan Vong War. He was *sixteen*. She talked about the legacy he left, even dying so young. About how great he was, because of that legacy."

"Was that your answer?"

"Closest I'm going to get," he said with a sad, sad smile. "Marin, I can't go into battle second-guessing every step, wondering if it might kill or save me. I *have* to be ready to die, because otherwise there's no way I can die well."

She saw he believed that, with all his heart, and there was no way she'd convince him otherwise. "Okay," she said, "But *I'm* not ready for you to die. I'm going to go with you and I'll watch your back, okay? I'm going to *keep* you alive, even if I have to fight some *shabla* Sith queen to do it."

"I really hope you do."

His smile got a little less sad, and somehow that triggered more tears. Marin snarled another swear and wiped them away. When her vision cleared Vitor was right in front of her. She wasn't sure who opened arms first. They pulled each other into a hard embrace, tight enough to feel his still-beating heart and the warmth of his breath. She pounded his breath, like that would bring him even closer, and his body shook, and she realized he was crying too.

They stayed there like that for a long time, alone with the dappled moving shadows, the tall trees and more she hadn't noticed until now. There was so much life: insects and birds, flowers sprouting bright colors from the dirt, everything richly resonant in the Force like they were trying to drown out the specter of death.

To his surprise, Davek's thoughts did not turn to grieving the day after his mother's death. The days leading up to it had been mournful enough, and now that she'd passed his thoughts had turned as clear as Zonama Sekot's blue skies. His mother was gone, and he knew what had to be done next.

He spent a good part of the afternoon discussing battle strategy with Arlen, Lowbacca, Marasiah, and Allana aboard his personal shuttle. There were still far too many unknowns for his liking, and

far too much reliance on intelligence from a captured Sith, but they could only work with what they'd been provided. It quickly became clear that the Jedi and Imperial Knights would have to work closely together. From there, it was obvious that Marasiah and his sons would do better to join *Jade Shadow* on its flight back to Ossus while he made the long return to Imperial Space alone. He'd have plenty to do on the journey, namely recruit trusted captains willing to follow him into a war that was, on first glance, none of the Empire's business.

Even on second glance- from a purely political, secular standpoint- the Empire had little cause to invade Hapes, even if its masters had backed Veers. His mother's last wish impelled him; he knew his actions in separating the Jedi and Imperial Knights had been a wound to her, as a mother and as a Jedi, and he'd always meant to make it up to her somehow. He couldn't accomplish it while she was still alive, but he had his chance now. It would not be easy, but he'd never forgive himself if he didn't try.

Arlen understood that. They hadn't exchanged many words since Davek's arrival on Zonama Sekot, but he could see it in his brother's eyes.

Once a basic battle plan had been hacked out, Allana excused herself from Davek's shuttle. Lowbacca joined her but Arlen refrained from following. Marasiah, sensing the brothers needed a moment of quiet, went out with the Jedi.

Davek and Arlen looked at each other from opposite sides of the briefing table in the shuttle's hold. He tried to remember the last time they'd been alone together and couldn't. He only knew that it had been over eight years.

They'd never been close growing up. Arlen had been the older child and natural Jedi, while Davek, frustratingly bereft of the Force, had fumbled early on until chance, fate, or *Voidwalker* had set him on a destined path. For a time they'd grown closer: Imperial admiral and Imperial Jedi, both fathers to Force-strong children who'd trained together and grown close under their grandmother's watchful guidance. Those good years had lasted nearly two decades

but now they felt like a mirage, so different they were from all that had followed.

Much of that was Davek's fault. He'd done what was necessary to safeguard his father's legacy. He'd never stopped believing that. He'd made the right choices, but they didn't absolve him of the unfortunate side effects. Now he was trying to make amends, as he's always planned to, though he'd never dreamed of it happening like this.

He wanted to tell that to this brother, but he'd never been good at explaining things to Arlen. And, truthfully, Arlen had never been good at explaining himself to Davek.

Still, Arlen was the one to take the first step. "The Jedi and the Hapans are both going to be in your debt for this."

"The Sith are an enemy to us all," Davek said. Even now it was hard to be honest with his brother.

"I know. And after going through one war you shouldn't have to send your troops into a second. They shouldn't have to fight it. Are you sure you can muster the ships and people?"

"An advantage of being Emperor," Davek said with a brittle smile, "Is that when you tell people to jump, they beg to know how high."

"I guess being a despot has its upsides," Arlen said, but with a smile.

"There are several." He paused. "I didn't want to become one. I did what I had to, for Father's legacy."

"I know, Davek. We've been over this." Arlen sighed. "You know I didn't like it at the time. I still don't. But I've been thinking..."

He trailed off. "Yes," Davek prodded.

"In remaking the Empire and breaking off the Imperial Knights, maybe you were working the will of the Force all along. Maybe it was preparing you for this exact goal."

The idea had frankly never occurred to Davek. He wasn't used to thinking of the Force as guiding mortals on its purpose. Even Marasiah shied from that kind of talk.

"It's possible," Davek allowed. Arlen seemed like he wanted to be believe it.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is...." Arlen trailed off again and scratched his head. "I guess I should say 'thank you.'"

"I'm doing this because Mother asked for it. And because I've needed to make amends." Finally, he was out with it.

Arlen's face relaxed into a slanted smile. "I kind of figured that. And I'm glad."

He pushed up from his seat. So did Davek. They turned to the cabin's exit but each hesitated to walk out first. Arlen realized that, chuckled, and loped ahead. Davek followed, caught up with his brother into two strides, and they walked together through the door, down the ramp, and out onto the landing field. The light was tinting gold, the sun was setting fast, and soon this clear, beautiful day without grief would be over.

They stood together at the bottom of the ramp. Vitor and Marin were both circling *Jade Shadow*, giving the hull a pre-flight check. His cousin's arrival seemed to lift Vitor's spirits somewhat, and Davek was glad. He hoped that Marin could help his son move past the demons that had been dragging him.

It was a fond hope, but it drew him back to the choices that had separated Marin and Vitor in the first place. He glanced carefully at Arlen and saw his brother watching them as well.

"When this is all over," Arlen said, "I'm not expecting the imperial Knights and the Jedi to rejoin in one happily family. But we don't have to stay apart, do we?"

Davek knew he was talking about another broken family. "No. I think we've been apart long enough."

He turned to his brother and held out a hand, flat and waist-high. Arlen looked down at it, blinked, and asked, "That's it?"

"That's how it starts," said Davek.

Arlen shrugged, took the hand, and immediately used his other to draw Davek in for an embrace. A palm pounded between his shoulders. Arlen was always big on back-slapping. Davek remembered the feeling perfectly. Sometimes eight years felt like forever. Sometimes it was no time at all.

\* \* \*

Night had just fallen and the clear sky filled with stars. The beautiful day was over and it was time to go. Everyone had retreated to the landing field and started filling up *Jade Shadow* and Emperor Fel's scarlet shuttle. Everyone was going away again, except for two.

The young boy and the old woman stood at the edge of the field and watched. Neither of them had a place in the coming battle, and they knew it, and while before Kol might have ached to join Nat and his mother, he felt different now. He was still anxious for them and for all the other Jedi, but he knew that it wasn't in his power to help them. One day that would be different but not now. There was still so much he had to learn.

Before *Jade Shadow* took off, his mother and Nat came over to give them farewell embraces.

"You're going to have to be extra-careful, Nat," Tahiri said as she pulled away from the tall teenager.

"He'll have Arlen and me to look after him," Jade put a hand on his shoulder.

"As long as everyone else is with me I'll be fine," Nat said, but Kol could tell he wasn't as confident as he tried to sound.

Jade bent low and embraced her younger son. She kissed him once on the forehead and said, "Be strong, Kol."

"You too, Mom."

They pulled apart. Nat and Jade waved goodbye one last time, then turned for the ship. They became silhouettes against the glow spilling off *Jade Shadow's* landing ramp, and then the light swallowed them up. Tahiri stood behind Kol and placed her small hands on his shoulders. The two of them watched as *Jade Shadow* kicked off first. It rose into the sky on its repulsor-jets then kicked in thrusters and soared away. Kol pivoted to watch it until it was gone. When he looked back to the landing field the Emperor's red shuttle was rising too. It accelerated smoothly, banked over the city, and then it, too, was gone. Finally Kol watched Marin's X-wing kick off and follow those already gone. The four lights of its quad engines shrank into the distance and combined into one, then one dwindled into nothing, and they were finally alone again.



"You don't have to miss them," said a young voice beside him. "They're not really gone."

Kol looked to his right. In the dim light he could make out a boy about his age with sandy-blond hair. Sekot, of course.

"Of course I'm going to worry," Kol said. "They might not all come back."

"I know. But even then, they won't really be gone."

"Easy for you to say," said Tahiri, not bitterly, but with humor.

"Maybe. But I'm as mortal as any of you." Sekot must have sensed Kol in the Force, or seen the incredulity on his face, because the conscious world added, "It's true. Every life ends. Even mine."

It was hard to think of something so powerful and mysterious as mortal. It was even harder to think of it as a little boy. Kol asked, "Why do you keep showing up like that?"

"Like what?" the boy asked innocently. Kol felt Tahiri's faint amusement.

"Like my ancestor. Anakin Skywalker."

"Every life ends, and every life begins." The voice assumed a gravity inappropriate for its boy's face. "Anakin Skywalker was close to me when my life began. His descendants have been close to me since. I like to think our destinies will always be entwined."

Kol felt acutely aware that he was the newest of those descendants and the latest called Skywalker. He also remembered what Jaina had told him, that he'd have a son of his own and there'd be Skywalkers after him. That was all far away, and it beggared the boy to think of it.

But because of what his grandmother had seen, Kol told Sekot, "Don't worry. I think they will."

When he glanced back at his side there was nothing except a dark field spread under starry night. The boy was gone but he was sure Sekot had heard and understood.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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Davek knew that when he arrived on Bastion and declared his intention to invade the Hapes Cluster, he would get considerable pushback. He'd made himself Emperor but he was determined not to be a tyrant, and he told his chief subordinates to speak their opinions without fear of reprisal.

Supreme Commander Hallis and Intelligence Director Vennefara objected most strongly. Both were too professional to get outright angry with him, but he'd never heard their voices raised to quite that volume.

"Majesty, we've barely had the resources to monitor Hapes from afar," Vennefara told him when he gathered both to his office aboard the *Jagged Fel*. He'd figured it was best to tackle them together. "We've been putting everything we have into tracking the Restorationists. We cannot take our fleets to battle until we have a proper estimation of the enemy."

"Then you'll put all our resources into that immediately," Davek told him. "In the meantime we'll make plans based on the information the Jedi have provided."

Relying on Jedi didn't give either of them comfort. Hallis said, "It's been barely a week since Kovix-589. Repairs have progressed quickly but I must *strongly* advise against taking them out so soon.

It would be especially bad for the morale of our soldiers. They've just finished one war. You promised them, Majesty, that they could put down their swords after we took out Veers and Grave."

"I don't plan on taking every ship we have. Only enough as necessary."

"The Hapans will not simply surrender when they see a larger fleet," warned Vennefara. "From what we *do* know, Queen Serissa had trained a fanatically loyal military. Many of her best officers are men or women from the lower classes. They owe her for their elevation.

Davek, who'd ordered a major push to enlist non-humans in his navy, allowed a slight smile. "Irony, isn't it?"

"They will not give in easily. They will make us pay in blood for any victory," Hallis warned. "Your Majesty, please, I *beg* you to reconsider."

When he saw the pleading in their eyes Davek was tempted. Both men had served him with utmost loyalty and competence. If he went through with this it would lower him in their eyes and damage his relationship with them long after the mission was done.

But in the choice between disappointing them and disappointing Arlen and what remained of his mother, there was no hesitation.

"I understand your concerns. Believe me, I do, but this has to be done. Queen Serissa has slaughtered millions of her people and it's a shame on rest of the galaxy that she's been allowed to do it. More importantly, the forces that engineered Veers' war against us are also behind Serissa. No one will be safe until they're removed."

"But what *then*?" asked Hallis. "If you remove Serissa, what happens? Another tyrant might take control, with the same allies."

"No. The Jedi and the Hapan exiles are going to make sure that doesn't happen."

"Will the Hapan people respect Allana Djo as their new queen?" Vennefara asked skeptically.

"The nobles who deposed her mother were liquidated in Serissa's purges. Most of them don't even remember having a Jedi queen, only a Sith one."

"And you believe they'll be more receptive to a Jedi?" Vennefara asked. "Many Hapans have benefitted from Serissa's rule, ugly as it has been. Otherwise she wouldn't have her loyal military."

"You know what kind of leader Allana is from her time helming the Alliance." Davek looked between them. "She healed the wounds in Senex-Juvex. She can do the same in whatever new Hapes is formed once the Sith are gone. And you can't deny she'd be a far less bloody queen."

"No, we cannot," sighed Hallis. "Your Majesty, all my other points still stand. I believe an invasion of Hapes is a hasty, foolhardy decision that will cost too many lives and gain the Empire little."

Davek saw the old admiral stiffen. He didn't need the Force to know Hallis expected to be relieved of his position. He glanced at Vennefara. "Your opinion, Director?"

"The same, Majesty."

"If I give the order, will you use every resource to gather intel on the Hapans' naval capabilities, including cooperation with the Hapan exiles and your Alliance counterpart?"

The Elomin nodded. "I will."

"Then you're so ordered. Supreme Commander Hallis, I've valued your service for many years. I would like to value it in the future. That's why I've decided to directly coordinate the assets for this mission. That includes using selecting every ship and captain for the invasion fleet. Are you willing to direct the disposition of our forces that remain in Imperial Space?"

Uncertainty clouded his face, but Hallis nodded too.

"Thank you, gentlemen. You're dismissed."

They saluted and left Davek alone. It had frankly gone better than expected; he'd been prepared for Hallis' resignation but it seemed the man still wanted to serve, even in limited capacity.

Having to plan the entire invasion himself left Davek with more than enough to do. He's sent Marasiah and his sons back to Ossus to coordinate between the Jedi and Imperial Knights, and on the long lonely flight back from Zonama Sekot he'd kept busy with several dozen calls to different captains and admirals. He'd already gathered a substantial list of ships willing and able to join his hasty,

foolhardy mission. Admiral Jaeger's *Afsheen Makati* was still undergoing repairs from the recent battle but he was willing to transfer his flag and senior staff to the *Thrawn*, an older but still-mighty destroyer of the same model. Captain Korak, another trustworthy Voidwalker, was willing to bring his battle group.

Over the past eight years Davek had grown used to commanding from the bridge of the *Jagged Fel*. It was a fine ship and a worthy ode to his father. Hallis and Vennefara were very correct in warning not to underestimate Serissa's fleet. With that in mind, he patched a call from his office's comm system to Yaga Minor, where his captured super star destroyer was being worked over.

He had to wait five minutes, and the first thing General Lukas Briggs said when his holo-image appeared was, "I'm very sorry for the delay, Your Majesty."

"Perfectly acceptable, General. I'm sure your work is keeping you quite busy."

"That it has, sir."

"I'd like your opinion, General. Based on the rate of repairs so far and the capability of the Yaga Minor 'Yards, can your super star destroyer be battle-ready in one week's time?"

The shock was plain on Briggs' face. Davek had expected rumors of a new operation to have flitted down to him by now. The general said, "It's... possible, sir. *Nemesis* took little damage in the fight at Kovix, but there's a lot of older scars from other battles. The Restorationists patched them up, but you could tell they were mostly using scavenged and black-market supplies. I just gave the order to tear out some of their repair jobs and re-do them properly."

"Can those re-dos be finished in a week?"

"I... Yes, Majesty. I'll have to allocate more manpower, but yes."

Davek still heard reticence. "What else is there, General?"

"Majesty, *Nemesis* was staffed with crews loyal to Veers from the moment it left drydock. None of our people have ever served on it before. They don't know its systems. There's been a few Restorationists who've volunteered to teach us about the ship, but there's still a lot of learning to be done."

"Do you think more prisoners might be willing to teach if I offer them amnesty?"

The general's brows drew together. "I'm sure there would be. Your Majesty... May I ask what kind of action you'd want *Nemesis* for?"

Davek explained everything he needed to know, and watched a succession of surprise, denial, acceptance, and resolve wash over the general's face. Davek had mentally flipped back and forth on whether he wanted to use Veers' super star destroyer, but his mother's last request had decided him. If he was going to bring his war-weary fleet against the Hapans he couldn't afford to throw away his most crushing weapon. He just needed to make Veers' sword his own.

It took Briggs a long moment to process all Davek told him. Finally he said, "I understand why you want to use *Nemesis*, Your Majesty. It will be repaired, crewed, and battle-ready in one week."

"Thank you, General. When we go into battle I'll be planting my flag on that ship. As you'll be most familiar with its systems, I'd like you to captain it."

Another moment of shock, and another nod. Davek had known since *Voidwalker* that Briggs always got the job done when it counted.

"And one last thing, General. That ship is no longer *Nemesis*. As of this moment I'm officially returning it to its original name."

"*Invincible* it is, sir," Briggs nodded. "I never liked Veers' name for it anyway."

"Indeed. Thank you for your service, General. You know what you have to do."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Briggs snapped a salute. Davek favored him with a restrained and regal nod, then shut off the connection.

That dropped his office into soft silence again. Everything was still on track to happen as it should, but he knew he had one more call to make and he did not expect this one to go as well. Deciding there was no choice but to get it over with, Davek hailed his adoptive cousin Kanarn on his Chiss Ascendancy destroyer.

Kanarn took about as long to receive the call as Briggs, and when his image appeared over Davek's console the Chiss greeted the emperor with a polite bow. "Greetings. I'm very sorry to hear about your mother."

"Thank you, Captain."

"My mother sends condolences also. She said to tell you that she'd always respected the woman strong enough to steal Jagged away."

Davek was tired, but he gave an honest smile. That was indeed something his Aunt Wyn would say. "Give her my regards. However, I'm not calling about my mother. I wanted to know about the disposition of your ships."

"We're at Bilbringi right now, getting final refits. Two days ago the order from Csilla came down to officially end our mission and return to Ascendancy space."

Davek's only surprise was that Kanarn's commanders had waited a week since the battle to do so. The Chiss Ascendancy was never enthusiastic about actions outside its borders. Now that Veers was dead and therefore punished for his crimes against the Chiss, there was no reason for Kanarn to stay.

"I want you to know that our navy will be taking action again soon, this time outside Imperial Space."

Kanarn looked confused. "Where?"

"The Hapes Cluster. We'll be going to remove Serissa Lohr from power and install Queen Allana Djo on her rightful throne."

In all the years he'd known Kanarn, Davek had never seen the Chiss's jaw drop wide in shock. When he finally brought it up he said, "That is... a radical undertaking."

"I don't expect the Ascendancy to pitch in ships for this fight. However, if they have *any* intelligence they're willing to share on Hapes, no matter how small, I would consider it a personal favor to be paid back later."

"I will relay your request," Kanarn said dully. His face was full of questions but he knew his cousin the Emperor would only tell him what he was necessary.

"This will be a special collaboration between the Empire, the Hapan exile community, and the Jedi Order. The galactic community has allowed Serissa's tyranny to go on for too long. If the Alliance will not act with moral authority, we will," Davek said. It was how he planned to phrase it when he announced this mission officially.

Kanar knew there was more than that, but he nodded again. "I will inform my commanders. And... Davek... Good luck."

"Thank you, Kanarn," Davek returned a smile. "And thank you for all your help these past years. Please, give your mother my love."

"I will. Is there anything else?"

"Not at this time."

"Goodbye, Your Majesty." Kanarn snapped his hand up in a salute. Davek knew Chiss rules about saluting foreign leaders. He knew it wasn't done. He took in that small, grand gesture with an approving nod, then killed the connection.

It felt very strange for Marasiah to be among Jedi again. As Empress and First Knight her primary duty had been to make the Imperial Knights into an order that was like the Jedi but different, more militant than monastic, explicitly political in the way the Jedi tried hard not to be. She hadn't allowed herself to wonder what the Jedi, to whom she'd once belonged, thought of her Knights. Doubt wasn't just a luxury in wartime, it was a danger.

It could still be those things, and she was lucky that Arlen gave no hint of judgment. He was as focused on the task ahead as she was, but beneath that she could detect a core of humming optimism. He was working with his brother again after all this time, and it had sparked new life in him. That was no surprise; she'd seen it in Davek as well. For all their differences and all the times they hadn't gotten along, the sons of Jaina Solo complemented and needed each other. She hoped a successful mission on Hapes would be glue that bound the Jedi and Imperial Knights closer for years to come.

They had plenty to do while Davek prepared his fleet for battle. The second day after the return to Ossus, Marasiah met Arlen, Jade



and Lowbacca in one of the Jedi's spartan meditation chambers. She'd decided to bring her sons along; as Imperial Princes they deserved their piece in the decision-making.

"We can muster close to two hundred able-bodied Knights for this mission," Arlen explained. "The question is what we're going to *do* with them. We need to decide how we'll split up for two targets."

"Davek plans on leading the Imperial fleet to Hapes," Marasiah told them. "He's going to publicly commit himself to removing Serissa. That means he has to do it himself. Just getting to Hapes is going to be a hard slog, so he's diverting about two-third of his forces to that fight. The rest will go to Shedú Maad under the command of Admiral Jaeger."

"Once Serissa knows a fleet is coming for her, the Sith will know we're coming for *them*," said Jade. "That means we need to act very fast to blockade Shedú Maad so they can't move ships out."

Lowbacca gave a series of roars Marasiah couldn't understand. Arlen explained, "The thing about Shedú Maad is that it's very hard to get into and get out of. Jaeger can lay siege easily but you can be sure the Hapans will have ships and mines blocking passage through the ice-clouds around the planet. He should probably send an advance force to surround Shedú Maad before Davek sends the rest of his fleet."

"I'll let them know," Marasiah nodded. "Grand Master, I'll assume you'll want to lead the Jedi against the Sith."

The Wookiee gave an affirmative roar. Jade added, "I'll be going too."

"Davek is going to position us as allies of Allana and the Hapan exiles. That means most of the Knights will be going to Hapes."

"Have you decided which ones?" asked Vitor.

"Not specifically. I'd like to combine Jedi and Knights on both fronts."

Lowbacca roared again and Arlen said, "We agree."

"The first group of Imperial Knights have already left Bastion and are inbound for Ossus. They'll be bringing all the cortosis we recovered from the Restorationists."

"How much did you find?" asked Arlen.

"By the end they were low on the armor and were only giving it to elite troops. The only ones we found were aboard *Nemesis* and it's not enough to suit everyone, but it can still be useful."

Lowbacca roared something and Arlen suggested, "If we have limited amounts, we can make bucklers or shields out of the stuff. We have forges that can do that."

"That should surprise the Sith," Jade nodded.

"Did you ever figure out how Veers got enough cortosis for stormtrooper armor?" Arlen asked Marasiah. "It's a really hard material to come by."

"According to some of the Restorationists we captured, it was a gift from a certain Kuati ally."

"Retor," the Jedi said darkly. "I don't suppose we ever learned what happened to him."

Marasiah shook her head. "We didn't find a trace of him on *Nemesis*. He probably escaped or was destroyed in the attempt."

"I don't think we're lucky enough for the second option."

"Darth Terrid says Retor- Darth Kroan- was on *his* side during the Sith schism," Jade said. "Which means at least we won't have to worry about running into him on Shedua Maad. Which is something."

"We'll have to take what we can get," Arlen shrugged. "It's good your Knights are coming with spoils, but we still need to decide who goes where."

Lowbacca roared and Arlen nodded soberly. "You're right. The more Jedi on Shedua Maad... the better."

"And Davek insists on Imperial Knights at Hapes," Marasiah said. "As Princes, Vitor and Roan should probably go there and protect Allana."

She glanced at her sons and caught a faint but determined nod from Vitor. His mood seemed to have improved since they'd left Zonama Sekot. He was still more quiet and pensive than usual, but she sensed less uncertainty beneath his thoughts.

Roan asked, "Is there a plan on taking the Hapan capital? And how do we know Serissa will be there?"

"We don't," said Marasiah. "But from what we can tell, she doesn't command from the front line so she probably won't be on a Battle Dragon fighting your father."

"Probably," Jade echoed. "There's a lot of probablies. I don't like it."

"No one does," said Arlen. "Right now, Roan, we don't have a concrete plan to get inside the Fountain Palace, which is where we'll assume Serissa will be. Even if she'd not inside it's essential we take it. Allana says it was an armored bunker disguised as a pretty statehouse when *she* lived there forty years ago. I'm sure the Sith made it even more defended."

"But you're lacking updated intelligence," Roan said simply.

"Unfortunately, yes. But like I said, we have to do what we can."

Marasiah sensed her younger son was about to say more, but he held back. Instead Vitor spoke up. "I agree that the Knights need to have a presence on Hapes. But Mom... I think you should go to Shedu Maad."

"Why is that?"

"We want to combine teams. The Jedi are going to need good Knights at their back when they go into the Sith Temple. You're the strongest of us. And more importantly... I think Dad would want it."

He couldn't have known that Davek had suggested the same on their last conversation. Vitor added, "Grandma wanted it too, I think. Having you and Uncle Arlen fighting together would do a lot to bring the Jedi and Imperial Knights closer."

Vitor knew something about the power of symbols. He would make a good Emperor one day. She favored him with a wry smile. "You're wise beyond your years, Prince."

He looked away, not out of embarrassment but something else. "I just think it's the best plan for everyone."

"So long as you and Roan are watching each other's backs," added Arlen.

"We will," Vitor nodded firmly. "And I think Marin wants to come too."

Marasiah watched as Arlen's tight smile turned bittersweet. Both parents knew how close their children had been once. Tearing them a part, knowing how much that hurt their children and being unable to help, was something they wished they'd never had to experience.

Maybe this really was Jaina's last wish, come true. She still didn't see the Imperial Knights rejoining the Jedi Order, but if this mission knit the broken fabric of the Fel family it would be worth it. Win or fail it would be worth it.

"It sounds like it's set," Vitor told Marin after leaving the meeting. "We'll both be going to Hapes."

He found her in the Temple's main hangar, fiddling with her X-wing. She seemed to do that a lot. He hadn't noticed her spending any time with other Jedi on Ossus since their arrival.

"Did you have to press for it?" she asked as she leaned against the starboard engine casing.

"My mother suggested it. My father's going to be leading the attack on Hapes and he wants as many Knights as possible protecting Allana and the other exiles."

"Makes sense," Marin nodded. "Where's *she* going to be?"

"She'll be going to Shedu Maad. So will your father." Marin stared, expecting more. "I suggested it. But I think she was leaning in that direction anyway."

"Why did you suggest it?"

He sighed and stepped closer, beneath the shadow of the S-foil. "I think it would be... better for her to stay away."

She frowned. "You haven't told her, have you?"

"I haven't told anyone except you."

Marin sighed. "Oh, Vitor... Is this really what you want to do?"

"I don't want them worrying about me when they're fighting Sith. It's better like this, really. I'll say goodbye in my own way." She stared in silence, dark eyes boring into him and saying more than words. "I mean it. I don't want to burden them with this."

"You're just burdening me, then?" Her voice choked.

He sighed. "I didn't want to. I just..."

"I understand," she sniffed. "I'll watch your back. No matter what."

"I'm glad I have someone to do that." It was true. Since telling Marin he felt lighter, less anxious and more certain.

"What about Roan?"

"I think he's going to come down to Hapes with us."

"And you won't tell him either?"

He'd thought about that one. It was harder than with his parents, because at least with them he'd know the last time when he'd look them in the eye. There was no way to know what would happen to his brother on Hapes. Roan might die too. Roan might be there to see Serissa kill him. They might get separated and never have a chance to say goodbye.

Uncertainty was still the worst part of it all. Despite that he'd made the same decision regarding Roan and for the same reasons. "I don't want him distracted either. So I won't tell him."

"Okay. That's your choice." Marin sighed. "I'll do enough worrying for them all. Is that okay?"

"I can't stop you," he said with the hint of a smile.

She smiled back, but her eyes were sad. He wished he'd get to see them otherwise, just one more time, but he knew by now that was not his fate.

"Mother says they're bringing new lightsabers for you and Vitor," Roan told his cousin. He'd found Mohrgan and Treis in one of the sparring rooms in the Jedi Temple's lower level, but they'd been loitering instead of practicing. According to Treis they'd done a lot of already while Roan was on Zonama Sekot.

"That's good to know," Mohrgan said. "It wouldn't feel right, going into battle with a colored blade."

Roan smirked, because Vitor had said the same thing, but Treis' expression was shadowed. When they'd be stuck here during the battle at Kovix he'd been the patient one. Now that he'd learned of their new mission he'd turned anxious, and Roan knew exactly why.

"I think it's better that we're going to Hapes," he said. "It seems like it will be more a conventional battle, like we're used to. Shedú Maad is going to be Jedi versus Sith."

"Your mother's going."

That had surprised Roan a little. "Some Imperial Knights should go to Shedú Maad to stand with the Jedi."

"But not us."

"Do you *want* to go to Shedú Maad?" asked Mohrgan, incredulous.

Treis sighed and shook his head. "I don't know what I want."

"If you want to fight Sith we'll probably still find some on Hapes," Roan said. "If that's what you want."

"I said I don't know."

"The Jedi say revenge is a gateway to the Dark Side," Mohrgan said. "They're probably not wrong."

"I understand that," Treis insisted. "And whatever we run into on Hapes... I'll be thinking about the mission, not revenge on the Sith."

He sounded to Roan like a man trying to convince himself. He hoped his friend succeeded. They'd all need clear heads for the dangerous mission ahead.

He had his own nagging distractions. The meeting with his mother and the Jedi had confirmed that they really would be going into the Fountain Palace blind. That could end in all manner of disaster unless they got better intelligence. He knew someone who could give them what they needed, but he'd been loathe to bring it up with Elliah Chalk so far. Since returning from Ossus he'd avoided her entirely, but when he'd spotted her wandering, apparently listless, through the Temple halls he'd felt the urge to tell her.

There was only one thing to really do with that urge, and the sooner he acted the better. After he left Treis and Mohrgan he went to seek her out. The Jedi Temple was huge but he was aware of a few spots she liked to haunt. After checking all the practice rooms to make sure she wasn't watching anyone spar, Roan went up to the large garden that looked west out onto the desert. He found her and

Hogrum both sitting near the shallow pond at the garden's center. Their poses were relaxed but he could feel their restlessness in the Force. They knew something big was happening and wondered what part, if any, they'd play. Again, they weren't much different from him.

Roan approached them quietly from behind, but when Elliah turned to see him there was no surprise on her face. Maybe her Force-senses were getting better.

"Hi," she said simply. "It's been a while. I thought you were avoiding us."

"I've been busy," he lied.

"I'm sorry about your grandmother. From what some of these Jedi have been telling us, she was an amazing woman."

"She was. But we all got to talk to her before it was over. It was... as good as it could be."

"I'm glad." Elliah looked at her little brother. "We've been mostly bored, haven't we?"

"We know what's going on," Hogrum said. "Are you going to Hapes?"

"I will be. My father will be leading a battle fleet to liberate your world. I'm sure that must be... exciting for you."

Both siblings looked ambivalent. Elliah explained, "Hapes was home, but we were young when we fled."

"I don't actually remember it very well," Hogrum admitted.

"All I really remember is the insides of the Fountain Palace," said Elliah. "And after spending so long with the loyalists and all those old nobles... I can't say I cared for most of them."

"I thought you'd care about freeing your homeworld."

"Of course we do," Elliah insisted, and he felt disappointment. If they hadn't he could walk out of here without asking anything of them.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know your feelings are complicated."

Elliah looked down at her the pool. "Everyone says those exiles and that Jedi queen are really different from the Hapans we knew. I hope that's true. I hope they can make a better Hapes when this is all over."

"Have you talked to Allana Djo yet?"

"No," Elliah said, like the idea had never occurred to her. Curiously she asked, "Have you met her?"

"I can't say I know her *very* well... But she's a relative."

"Your relative?" echoed Hogrum. "How?"

"It's complicated. But... I think it might be good for you to talk to her."

Elliah was just looking at him, like she was seeing something new. It occurred to him that she, too, was a relative to a Hapan queen, though their cousins couldn't be more different. When their eyes met she jerked, just a little, and looked away. "Why would she want to talk to us? I know some of those loyalists were talking about putting *me* on the throne if they ever got rid of Serissa, but I don't want that. I doubt she does."

"It's not about that," Roan said, and let it all spill out. He explained that the Jedi's knowledge of the Fountain Palace was decades out of date, and that they'd need something better if they wanted to remove Serissa. He didn't actually make the request. He just watched grim understanding settle on their faces.

"I'm sure that even if you just tell us what you remember, it will help a lot," he said. "We can compare them with Allana's memories and construct a better map to follow."

"That's not as good as an in-person guide," said Elliah.

"This is going to be very dangerous. There's no need to risk your life."

"You're going and you're the same age as me," she said defensively.

"I'm also an Imperial Knight. I'm *used* to risking my life, and for better or worse I know how to take it."

Elliah took his point, but said, "Still. I can't guarantee I'd get it right if I tried to make a map from memory. I can picture all the rooms and halls and hidden corridors, but if they're in my head they're kind of a jumble... I don't want to get it I wrong. A wrong map's worse than no map at all and a guide's way better than either."



He didn't know Elliah Chalk well, but somehow he'd been sure this would end with her volunteering. It made him like her even more; it also made him terrified he might make a mistake to get her killed.

Hogrum tugged his sister's sleeve. "Do you *really* want to go back?"

"Not really. But they need help." She squeezed his hand. "There's no need for you to risk your life. Stray here where it's safe."

Hogrum looked like he'd never considered anything else. He said to Roan, surprisingly fierce, "If you let something happen to my sister, I'll never forgive you."

"I won't either," he said, very serious.

Elliah looked away from them both. Roan could tell the full weight of what she'd volunteered for was still settling.

"We dropped Allana on New Hapes coming back here," he told her, "But I think she's back now. You should go talk to her."

The resolve on Elliah's face suddenly wilted. "You don't think she'd... hold it against me, being related to Serissa?"

He gave her an encouraging smile. "I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

As she'd left Zonama Sekot, Allana had known she was leaving behind the last bit of peace she'd see in a long time. On New Hapes she reconvened with Tanith, who'd been mustering supplies, weapons, and willing fighters from the Hapan exiles. After a whirlwind of preparation they loaded everything they had into a few cargo haulers and set course for Ossus.

There was another whirlwind waiting there, and Allana was quickly swept away. In the first three hours after her arrival she met with Lowbacca and Arlen, then K'Kruhk, then Marasiah Fel and, via holo-link, her husband. When that was all done she reconvened with Tanith in her living space on one of the pyramid's higher levels. The younger woman had spent the same three hours going through a rush of meetings of her own, talking with some Imperial military officials and acting as liaison between them and her modest volunteer force.

Despite the non-stop frenzy, neither of them grew tired. When Allana looked at Tanith she couldn't mistake the excitement in her eyes. Since childhood, Tanith had dreamed of going back to Hapes and retaking it from the ones who'd killed her parents. Most of those killers had in turn been eradicated by Serissa, but the Sith menace behind it all remained. For all the stress, all the uncertainty, Tanith Zel couldn't wait to begin the fight.

Allana felt some of that rush, but it mixed with all kinds of trepidation and regret. Tanith's pure enthusiasm made her feel her age. The loss of Hapes had split her life almost exactly in half. The earlier half had sculpted her in many ways, but she felt the second half of her life, the life in exile, had made her into the woman she was now. Tanith and the other exiles saw her as Queen of Hapes, rightful heir to her deposed mother and inheritor of the throne. Allana thought of herself as a Jedi Master first, and then former head of the Alliance. Monarch was third down the line. If this mission was successful- and she prayed it would be- then that third mantle would become all of her. She knew from her mother how crushing the weight of ruling could be. The Hapes she'd take from Serissa would be radically transformed and horribly wounded. As Alliance Chief of State she'd tackled the task of rebuilding Senex-Juvex, but she'd been much younger then, and that region's pains were less personal.

Those anxieties could be fatally distracting, and she tried to put them aside as she listened to Tanith. She was describing her conversations with several of Davek Fel's chief officers, had while Allana was speaking with the emperor himself. As an aid, she brought up a holo-map showing the topography around the administrative city of Chume'Dan and the Fountain Palace.

"We still don't know exactly what defenses Serissa will have, but the Imperials are planning for a major collision around the planet."

"I'm sure she'll do everything we can to keep from getting on the ground," said Allana.

"The loyalists we rescued can't tell us much about the Palace, but they did have some reasonably up-to-date intel on the city and

its defenses. They're very powerful, as you can imagine, but also localized."

"I remember," Allana said. Because their secluded star cluster hadn't faced a war in generations, the Hapans had never installed full-cover planetary shields over the homeworld. "How far does it extend around the city?"

"The umbrella has a radius of twenty kilometers."

Not so local, Allana thought. "Doesn't sound ideal for a ground assault."

"Not *ground*." Tanith tapped the edge of the map, where the Palace's bluffs fell into ocean.

"Do we have equipment for an amphibious assault?"

"The Imperials do. They'll be sure to defend the cliffs and probably the ocean itself, but we can drop assault teams from low-orbit directly into the water. From there they can progress fast, get under the shield perimeter, and launch a full attack."

"Getting close enough for drops won't be easy."

"No. Getting into the Fountain Palace is going to be even harder."

"I know," Allana sighed. "I'll guide your commando teams best I can, but I haven't been there in forty years. A lot will have changed."

"Your Majesty, I still feel that your presence on the ground is... unnecessary."

"I understand the risk."

"It's too big of one, if you want my opinion. I think you'd be safer on Davek Fel's flagship."

"I wouldn't be able to help you from there," she said, but they both knew it was more than that. The coup forty years ago had defined them in different ways, but for both it was the turning point in the story of their lives. The liberation of Hapes was painfully personal to Allana, and if she couldn't play a direct part in it, she'd feel she'd failed both as queen and Jedi Master.

Tanith opened her mouth to argue more, but a buzz from the door interrupted.

"Come in," Allana called.

The door slid open. She was surprised to see Roan Fel step through. Behind him was a teenage girl about the same age with long black hair. From her dress Allana could tell she was Hapan.

"It's good to see you, Roan," Allana said. "Tanith, if you don't mind, we can finish this later."

"Actually, Miss Zel, I think you should stay," said the prince. "This is Elliah Chalk. She has something important to tell you."

"Word just came down," Jade Skywalker said as she stood before him, palm on the hilt of the lightsaber at her waist as a reminder that she could use it at any time. "The Imperials have started moving out. The initial task force will settle in the Maad system to prevent Sith from escaping. Then Emperor Fel will take his larger fleet for Hapes."

"So we'll be meeting them there?" asked Darth Terrid from his bench. Jade had left the door to his cell open when she'd stepped through. The narrow hallway beyond was his first glimpse of freedom in weeks.

"That's right."

"Fel shouldn't expect to just fly straight to Hapes. The capital world is at the center of the star cluster. Darth Saydel's navy will try and stop him at the outer systems."

"We're aware of that."

She wasn't going to tell him everything, but he hadn't expected her to. Terrid looked down at the shackles still on his wrists. After all this time he'd gotten used to their chafing. The Jedi surely knew he could snap his bindings whenever he chose; being a Sith was, after all, about breaking chains, or so he'd often told a Hapan princess. His shackles were a symbol of his submission.

"Will I be armed when we reach Shedu Maad?" he asked.

"That's not decided."

He looked up. "I won't be much use to you if I'm struck down the moment we land because I can't defend myself."

"I know."

He wasn't going to beg her to trust him. No one would trust a three-time traitor. He'd left the Chiss for the Jedi, Jedi for the Sith,

and the Sith for his own vain ambition. During thhisese days of solitary confinement he'd felt washes of irrational nostalgia for his half-remembered childhood in Chiss space, his brief youth with Jade and Jodram, even scattered moments when he'd felt content to serve Darth Krayt. He knew he'd never been truly happy as any of those; hence the striving, hence the treason. The dream of something greater had always lured him on.

"I have no intention of betraying you," Terrid told her, not because it would make her trust him, but because he wanted her to understand. It was another irrational compulsion. "I have no loyalty to the Sith whatsoever. I want to hurt them much more than I'd ever want to hurt the Jedi."

"I believe you," she said. She was shielding her thoughts in the Force and he tried to read her face. That, too, was unyielding.

He placed his elbow on his knees so his bound wrists hung in front of her. "Our goals in this are the same. And I have... no desire to see you hurt."

It was true. When he looked at Jade he felt less nostalgia than envy. She'd had no easy life: she'd lost her mother, her father, her husband. Despite that she was a Jedi Master with Jedi sons, and for all the damage she'd taken she seemed to have found a place in her life that was content. It occurred to him that perhaps her *lack* of ambition, her aversion to the heavy destiny carried with her name, was the secret to that accomplishment. By comparison Terrid had been born into no legacy. He'd killed and betrayed over and over to create one and all his ambition had left him chained in a cell with a shattered leg.

As he looked at his shackles, he heard Jade's lightsaber snap to life. He looked up; the violet blade hummed a wrist's flick from his head. Jade shifted it and tapped downward. Light flashed through the link binding his wrists, then was gone.

The weight of the cuffs was still there, but he spread his wrists wide, flexed his arms and shoulders, and felt more free than he had since Orelon.

"Thank you," he said.

"Come with me. We have a healer who's willing to mend the cracks in your leg bone. The Grand Master will decide whether to arm you."

"Of course."

"I have a question."

He said, "Go ahead."

"What do you think you'll do after this?"

It was something he'd never asked himself. During his confinement his mind had been constantly drawn to pasts actual and possible. After so long striving and failing the future seemed to hold nothing for him.

"I will decide that," he said, "*if* I survive."

Jade looked down at him, judging him and, he thought, pitying him again. Then she hooked her lightsaber to her belt, turned her back to him, and walked out the door. It still hung open when she was gone.

Darth Terrid got to his feet. He shifted pain off his bad leg but it still hurt. He took short unsteady steps to the threshold. Jade was waiting for him in the hallway, and he followed her out of his cell.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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To be One Sith was to submit entirely to the dream of Darth Krayt. Submission required trust in the purity of his dream, the power it provided, and the authority of Darth Wyyrlok to convey his truth. It required absolute devotion, even to the point of dying, and the sacrifice of personal ambition in the name of the final triumph of the Sith. Darth Krayt asked much of his followers. Sith like Terrid and Kroan had failed to achieve his standards and had thus been purged. Even Darth Kheykid had struggled with trust and sacrifice during his youth, but that was decades past. When Krayt's new command came from the mouth of Darth Wyyrlok, he did not hesitate to obey, even though it shocked him.

It shocked the younger, less experienced Sith more. After he gave orders to Darth Ruyn, the Twi'lek asked his unconcealed nervousness, "Are you certain we have the time to do everything Wyyrlok requests of us?"

"It is not her request, is it Darth Krayt's order," hissed Kheykid.

"Of course, Lord," Ruyn bowed his head. "We will try."

"You will *do* it. The future of the entire One Sith depends on you and the others."

The Twi'lek looked up with new age on his face. "Lord, once we are safely on Korriban... I hope to see you there."

Kheykid didn't want to give false hope, to Ruyn or himself. "Darth Wyyrlok wills it that I join her stand here. I will do everything I can to preserve Lord Krayt's vision. As will you."

"I will always remember your sacrifice."

"Good. One day it may be asked of you as well."

"I will try to live up to your example." Ruyn bowed one more time. "Goodbye, Lord Kheykid."

Once Ruyn had left to carry out his duties, Kheykid went in search of Wyyrlok. The abject admiration in the young Twi'lek eyes had jarred him. It had driven in the enormity of what he was about to do, and how difficult it would have been for other Sith.

Lord Krayt demanded that every Sith serve however he or she best fit his design. Kheykid knew he'd never have Wyyrlok's raw Force power, nor Maleth's ability to bridge minds, nor, thankfully, would he ever relish political power-plays and vermin schemes like Kroan. He was a fighter and a killer. Darth Xoran had recognized that early and made him into a weapon for the One Sith, but she'd taught him more. Xoran had shown him the strength that came from devotion, and that one Sith Lord could kill a Jedi Grand Master. In moments of rare vanity, Kheykid hoped he could replicate her feat before the end.

He found Darth Wyyrlok where he'd expected to find her. She sat in the middle of the vestibule beneath the main pyramid, back to the great stone doors of Darth Krayt's chamber. The Barabel stepped up and lowered himself onto the black-and-red flagstones in front of her.

"Everything is in motion now," he said. "Ruyn and the others will do as they're told, but they are right to say we don't have much time."

"It will be time enough," said Wyyrlok. Her eyes were closed in meditation, though Kheykid did not sense she was communing with Darth Krayt.

"Are you certain you don't want to join them on Korriban?"

"The future has been prepared for," she said cryptically. "*Trust*, Lord Kheykid."

"Always."



"The Jedi will come crashing against us like waves against rock. We will stand against them. If they overtake us, I will order Darth Saydel's ships to blast this place to atoms from orbit."

"I fear they might do that without your command," Kheykid confessed.

"If Saydel tries it now it would not matter. But no, she threw her lot with ours at Orelon. We'll stand against the Jedi together."

Kheykid wondered if Krayt's dreams had told her that, or her own assumptions. All he could do was what he'd always done, trust her words and follow her commands. This time he'd follow her to the ultimate end, but when they made their sacrifice against the Jedi they'd do so together, to protect Krayt's dream. If he was to die, he wanted his death to mean something. He wanted to leave a legacy behind. Ruyn and the others would take that legacy with them soon, leaving him behind to fulfill the purpose first proscribed for him by Xoran so long ago. He knew that, and was satisfied, and it gave him courage to face the waiting dark.

Korosh Vull had never had worked with communications arrays aboard a *Kontos*-class frigate, not aboard *Shieldbreaker* or *Voidwalker*. That specialists aboard *Oathkeeper* thankfully knew their machinery and they arranged for him to send and receive encrypted signals from a private secondary station located in a closet-sized room aft of the bridge. Vull was a tall man and the tiny space cramped, but he put it with it because he wanted to make his calls without anyone watching. If this went badly, and it very well could, he didn't want to look the fool in front of the entire *Oathkeeper* crew.

The experiences aboard *Voidwalker* a quarter-century ago forged many close relationships, of which Davek and Marasiah Fel's was merely the most famous. Vull had started that mission aboard *Shieldbreaker* and had sheltered aboard *Voidwalker* only after his original frigate was destroyed. He'd taken a handful of other TIE Demolisher pilots with him, but during their grueling six weeks behind enemy lines every pilot from *Shieldbreaker* had been killed except him. The interceptors from *Voidwalker* had barely fared

better, and a scant seven TIE pilots out of a combined sixty-two had survived. That kind of experience bred fraternity, and Vull had kept close contact with Marasiah until her husband seized power. He'd also kept in touch with the other pilots to vary degrees, and even after the Empire broke in civil war he'd kept his ears open for news about the only other Voidwalker pilots still in the service.

Pocs Norvok had been captain of a frigate at the start of the war and he was still one now. He'd had to wrack his memory, but Vull eventually remembered the personal hailing code he'd used to talk to Norvok over. He remembered Norvok's conservative bent from their old talks, and he'd noticed that his frigate had never seen front-line action during the war. That, plus a frayed friendship, wasn't much to gamble on, but it was the best he could do.

The calling code had worked, and he could tell even from Norvok's holo-image how the man had aged. Apparently the same held for Vull; Norvok squinted ahead for a moment before saying, "Emperor's bloody bones. I never thought I'd see you again."

"Hello, Pocs."

"Aren't you-" Norvok stopped himself and shook his head. "I don't believe this. I have to be hallucinating."

"No, you're not."

"I know you went over to Veers, Korosh. Where are you calling me from, prison?"

"No. I'm calling you from a ship."

Norvok squinted again. "You weren't at Kovix, then? They said none of your people got away from there."

This conversation was going to require a lot of lies, so he started early. "My frigate was on a pick-up mission to a base in the Velcar Sector. We were heading back to Kovix-589 when we heard it was under siege. Obviously, we didn't rush in."

"Obviously." Norvok paused. "You have a frigate now."

"*Kontos*-class. It's very nostalgic."

Norvok snorted, apparently amused. Vull was relieved and a little surprised the man didn't hold it against him for siding with Veers. The Norvok he'd known had been eminently professional and disciplined. Eight years of civil war seemed to have stripped

that away, as well as his previous patriotism. He seemed jaded and weary now. It was exactly what Vull had hoped for.

"We're renegades, Pocs. Our leaders have surrendered. We have no place to go."

"I'm a captain with a frigate of my own. What do you expect *me* to do? You should fly into the nearest base and surrender. I've heard prisoners aren't being treated that badly."

"Would you surrender if you were us?"

"I didn't side with Veers." Norvok sounded annoyed, not indignant. "That was your *choice*."

"I was CAG on his flagship. Fel fired first. I don't know what propaganda he's been telling you all these years, but that's what happened. *He* started this, not us."

Norvok gave the long sigh of a man who really didn't want to argue. "You didn't risk calling me to surrender. What, then?"

"I need your help. We're holding position and laying low- I won't say where- but we've decided to run for it."

"What are you going to do, fly across the galaxy and play pirate in the Outer Rim?"

Vull had already considered that idea and found it repulsive, but he nodded. "We'd rather live free than in prison. My entire crew has talked this over."

"Then what's stopping you from running?"

"We need to get out of here. Safely. Once we're clear of Imperial Space we'll never come back and you'll never hear from me again."

Norvok took that as incentive. "What can I do?"

"This ship is operating with a Restorationist transponder. We can modify that, but without proper codes we won't be able to make the enemy think we're friendly."

"I thought you wanted to escape, not pull a sneak attack."

"We need to get *out*. Again, I won't say where we are, but Fel's ships are patrolling this area. They must have gotten some tip about us. If you can get me an authentic transponder code for a *Kontos*-class frigate we can switch it on and sail out of this system, out of the Empire entirely, and nobody'll get close enough to touch us."

"And you think I can get you that?"

"You're a frigate captain yourself. I remember the things you can pull with that rank. Unless they've changed them since I've been gone."

"They haven't changed it, exactly..." Norvok still looked annoyed.

"All I'm asking for is a false ID code so we can get out unmolested."

"What if I give you the wrong code? What if the same ship you're faking as is in that system, hunting you?"

Norvok was handing him everything he needed. "Give me an ID from a ship you know *isn't*. Like those ships Fel is about to take on a major campaign outside Imperial Space."

His eyes narrowed. "How did you hear about that?"

There was no way he was going to tell Norvok that he was getting intel from a fugitive Sith Lord. "Just rumors. I don't even know where they're going."

"Neither do I," Norvok snorted. "But yeah... I've heard rumors too."

"So your ship won't be joining them?"

"Not that I want to. I thought we were done with this stupid war."

"We are. It sounds like Fel wants to start a new one."

His face crinkled in disgust. "I am aware of... certain ships that are being mustered at Yaga Minor."

"Including frigates like mine?"

"That's right." He sighed. "You should have never gotten yourself into this mess. You should have laid low and did only what you were told."

"Can you give me what I ask for? All I need is one thing, Pocs, and I'll never ask anything else from you."

Another sigh. "I will... see what I can do. Can you call me back on this freq in two hours?"

"Of course."

"All right. Two hours."

Norvok abruptly shut off the link. Vull sunk back in his chair and prayed he'd come through. There were a few other options he

could try, but this seemed his best chance, slim as it was. He wished Darth Kroan had given him a better explanation of his plan, but instead the Sith had taken his black ship and flown off to a location undisclosed. He'd given a promise to come back and even if Vull didn't like or trust the man, he wanted to see it kept. If Kroan's plan didn't work their options really would be prison or piracy.

He dwelled on those bad options for a few long minutes. As he got out of his seat and opened the door he noticed a new light on the console. *Oathkeeper's* main comm system was receiving a new transmission. He didn't know who else it could be if not Kroan. Vull hurried out to the main command deck and was surprised to see a large holo-image already broadcasting with a good portion of the bridge crew gathered around it. He was more surprised to see that the face on the holo was not Kroan's, but the Emperor Fel's.

"This is not a decision I've made lightly," Fel was saying. He'd draped himself in shimmering robes and even wrapped a thin metal crown around his head. "We are doing this to secure a better future for the Empire, and a better future for the galaxy. Beings galaxy-wide once looked to the Empire for safety and security, and if no one else will provide it then it is our duty to do so."

Vull realized he was seeing an all-frequency Empire-wide broadcast. *Oathkeeper's* hushed crew watched as Fel continued, "The powers controlling the Hapes Cluster have committed grievous crimes against their own citizens. Queen Serissa has overseen the purge of an entire class of people. Millions have been killed or enslaved and no one, not even the Alliance, has dared hold her accountable. Just as important, she has sheltered elements that helped instigate the treasonous war Moff Veers waged against the Empire. The seed of the so-called Restorationist menace was planted from there, and so we must go there to eradicate our true enemy once and forever."

Kroan's rumors had been exactly right. An invasion of the Hapes Cluster would be a massive undertaking and *Oathkeeper* would be able to slip into the attack fleet without raising alarm. What they'd do after that was another question, and again he had to trust Kroan to provide an answer.

"Once we liberate Hapes from its tyrant- and I assure you we will- then we will also reestablish our moral leadership and the unquestioned bravery of our soldiers. I know this is a bold step. I know many of you are confused or frightened by this decision. But in the end we will make a better Empire, and a better galaxy, through our actions at Hapes.

"I thank every Imperial citizen, soldier and civilian, for having fortitude thus far. We will walk this path a little further, and then *finally* we will know peace. As your Emperor I give you my promise. I will not lead you astray."

The signal shut off and Fel's image disappeared. Conversation immediately rippled across the bridge but Vull stood silent amidst it all. He wasn't surprised by Fel's move; the man had made his career on bold, unexpected acts. He was thinking that Pocs Norvok must have just finished watching the same message. If that didn't convince him to give *Oathkeeper* what it needed, nothing would. Fel couldn't have timed that better if he'd tried.

With *Intruder* as his transport, Darth Kroan could have sneaked right to the cliffs beneath the Fountain Palace and slipped unnoticed into the Hapan queen's fortress. Instead he released one carefully-timed hail when he was minutes away, announcing his presence but giving Darth Saydel no time for an elaborate response.

He received what he'd expected to: an order to dock at one of the secret hangar bays built into the cliffs, a dozen black-armored Hapan guardswomen as escort, and a trip down unfamiliar hallways to a small windowless meeting chamber deep below the palace.

"They always said you were bold, Darth Kroan," Saydel said instead of a greeting. She was dressed in elegant, folding silks that obscured her figure and, he was sure, her lightsaber.

"I believe boldness should be the way of the Sith. Sulking in the dark, following cryptic prophecies passed along by a tattooed alien... That always felt like a waste to me. I thought you and I were of like minds."

"You should have learned otherwise by now."

"Then you've hailed Sheddu Maad and informed Darth Wyyrlok of my reappearance? Or have you not gotten around to informing your master yet?"

Her lips twitched in distaste. "You didn't leave me the time. Which I'm sure was your intention. What are you here for, Kroan? What did you think you could gain by crawling to me?"

He spread his hands and smiled calmly. "A partnership for our mutual benefit."

"I had a *partnership* with Darth Terrid. You know what happened to him."

"Terrid's ambitions outstripped his powers."

"Darth Wyyrlok said the same about you."

That irritated Kroan but he didn't let it show. He'd only sell this by sounding confident and strong. Bluffing his way through negotiations was, thankfully, something he'd learned long before he'd been introduced to the ways of the Sith. "You are about to face a coalition of powerful enemies determined to remove you from your throne."

"I am aware, and I've been making preparations."

"I'm sure you have, but you know that even a quarter of the Empire's war machine is enough to crush your fleet. Your fights with the loyalists have strained your resources more than you want to admit."

"Fel just finished his own war."

"Yes, and that last battle cost him less than I'd hoped. Believe me, I know. I was there."

Her eyebrows drew together. "What do you want? Say it plainly."

"I can kill Davek Fel."

She stared at him hard. "How?"

"I have allies aboard an Imperial frigate, the only one to escape the siege at Kovix-589. They're procuring a false transponder ID now that will allow them to slip amongst Fel's invasion fleet."

"What do you need me for?"

"I need *your* ships to help mine. One little frigate can't take out Fel's flagship, but *it* can take down Fel, so long as my people and

yours work in cooperation. With their Emperor dead, the Imperials will be scattered. I can't guarantee they'll withdraw, but it will severely hamper their campaign. It should fracture their cooperation with the Jedi as well."

"Your offer's compelling," Saydel admitted. "What do you stand to gain?"

"I was a power once. I lost it all, not just because of Davek Fel but his brother and wife and son. I can avenge myself. You just might save your kingdom from an invasion. As I said, we both benefit."

She looked him over, as though evaluating whether he'd really risked flying into her clutches just for revenge. Like Kroan himself, she'd been born to vermin and raised to exercise secular power. They'd become Sith in part to attain more of that power. The difference was that he'd lost all he'd been born to while she'd climbed higher. He hoped she could imagine, even for a second, what it would be like to lose her throne. If she could, she'd understand the need for revenge.

"I believe a partnership *could* benefit us both," she said.

"I'm glad you agree."

"My ships will coordinate with yours. In the meantime, I insist you remain in the Fountain Palace, as my guest."

"I didn't come here to make myself your prisoner," he snapped.

Her smile was infuriatingly confident. "I said *guest*, Lord Kroan. You'll have all the luxuries a man of your breeding could want, and no armed guards."

"But guards on my ship, I'm sure."

"Yes. And I'm sure you'd be able to kill them and escape if you wanted to, but the moment you leave Hapes our partnership is over."

"Why is it important that I stay here?"

"If I can't keep tabs on you, I can't even pretend to trust you. If your plan fails, and Emperor Fel really does take Hapes, I'll at least have your beautiful ship to escape on."

Kroan didn't like being forced into anything, but securing this pact was more important. Warningly he said, "If you try to harm



me, or if you betray me to Wyyrlok, I *will* find out. I will kill your guards, take my ship, and escape."

"I didn't doubt you'll try. But don't worry, Lord Kroan. Right now we have the same enemy. Until that changes, we can remain partners." She gave a sly smile. "And if you don't my saying, you're very good at striking bargains. Pitching, perfect, and sealing them."

It was a look that could have snared younger, weaker men. Kroan responded with a polite, professional smile. "I've had a lifetime of practice. I may be Sith, but I've always been a businessman at heart."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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The wall of double-disc Battle Dragons and long, narrow Nova cruisers was spread thin, but there were enough vessels to guard the pulse mass generator mines the Hapans had laid out along the edge of this system. Their artificial gravity well generators had pulled the Imperial fleet from hyperspace and dropped them into a maelstrom of lancing turbolasers and arching missiles. The star destroyers and support ships quickly dropped into a defensive formation while hundreds of TIE fighters streaked out to battle the Hapan Miy'tils and knock out the interdiction mines one-by-one.

Allana watched it all in silence from the bridge of Davek's Fel's flagship, the super star destroyer *Invincible*. The sole habitable world in the Arabanth system was a small blue sphere in the far distance, barely visible through the strobing laserfire and constant explosions. Allana had last been there more than half a lifetime ago but its distant dot was enough to bring back memories of its beautiful seas, modestly elegant cities, and playful logic games the people had entertained her with. She was afraid the sight of Hapes itself might overwhelm her.

The Transitory Mists provided a natural defensive wall that had encouraged Hapes' history of isolation. The capital world lay at the

heart of the cluster and could only be reached by several precise, winding paths that required many hyperspace jumps through clear channels in the Mists. Davek had explained that his goal was a series of fast, precise strikes that would carve them a path to Hapes itself. Once there, they'd eliminate Serissa. To accelerate their thrust, Davek had plotted a series of jumps that skirted them well-clear of inhabited star systems wherever possible and limited the chances for engagement with Hapan ships before they reached their target.

The Sith queen seemed to have anticipated this. With the route Davek had plotted, there were only four places where they were forced to drop inside the borders of a star system and align for the next jump. The Hapans had been waiting with pulse mass generators and warships at each of those, and their defenses were greater at each successive location. The Arabanth system was the last stop before jumping to Hapes itself, and Serissa's ships were stubborn in their defense.

Allana was no naval tactician and for the most part she watched Davek handle the fight, often directly but also through *Invincible's* commanding officer, General Briggs. The super star destroyer was mighty in itself, and it was just a fraction of what they'd brought with them. After initially keeping his capital ships back and letting the TIEs scout the locations of the pulse mass generators- hard to spot, she gathered, for the Hapans' jamming and the aggregate chaos of battle- Davek ordered many of his destroyers to charge the wall head-on.

*Invincible* was not exempt from that order. The giant warship unleashed wave after wave of green turbolaser fire. Allana watched as they tore through the shields of a nearby Battle Dragon. A great explosion at the center blasted apart the vessel's twin discs and sent them drifting, but *Invincible* kept firing until both discs had been shredded to drifting debris.

These Imperial ships were liberators helping Allana, but a lot of Hapans had already died under their fire. When this was all over and Serissa was removed, she didn't know how Hapans would look back on this campaign. It was an invasion and a restoration both,

and how history recorded it would depend so much on what happened afterward. Hapan society would need to be drastically rebuilt, and she didn't even know if there'd be a foundation left once this battle was over. Nor was she sure that a new queen was what Hapes needed. The old aristocracy had been smashed forever; on both New Hapes and under Serissa, society had already been remade.

A shudder through the deck reminded her that future problems were less important than the current battle. *Invincible* and its support ships were still pressing forward. Davek was splitting his fleet into smaller attack units and directing them after different interdiction mines. They unleashed massive washes of turbolaser fire against the Hapan ships that clustered close to defend. Against the superior Imperial firepower they didn't have a chance, but they kept on defending, bravely, futilely. It ached Allana's heart to see every Hapan warship explode, and she knew that the ones gathered to defend the capital would fight even harder.

The space ahead was still lit bright by explosions and laserfire when Briggs announced, "Your Majesty, the last pulse mass generator is down. We can go to hyperspace again."

"Not until the path is clear," Davek said.

Allana came up behind him and touched his shoulder. "Can I try speaking to the Hapan fleet?"

Davek frowned. "What do you think that can accomplish?"

"I'm hoping that if they hear from me, at least some of them may surrender."

His eyes showed how likely he thought that was, but Davek said, "All right. You can try."

While Davek went back to directing the fight, Briggs showed her over to the communications station. Its lieutenant initialized an all-frequency broadcast and let Allana lean close to speak.

She'd barely had time to formulate what she'd say. Just as important was how she said it and that part came easily. She let her voice convey both regal resolve and personal heartbreak as she said, "I am Allana Djo, rightful Queen of Hapes. The Imperial forces have come on my behalf to remove Serissa Lohr from the Fountain

Palace and liberate the Hapan Consortium from her oppression. Our war is *not* against Hapan civilians or soldiers. It is against Queen Serissa and her Sith allies, who have been using the Hapes' people as their pawns for forty years.

"All Hapan warships, *please* stand down. Captains who do so will receive a total amnesty. We will only fire on ships that stand in the way of preventing our singular goal. To the commander of each and every ship, I beg you, stand down. Save the lives of your crew. Serissa does not deserve your loyalty and you do not deserve to die. For the sake of the future for *all* Hapans, *please* stand down!"

When Allana got all the words out and stepped back from the console, the broadcast ended. She felt emptied and hollow inside. She and Briggs watched the tactical displays and watched the forward viewport and waited for some ship, any ship, to pull out of the line of fire and offer surrender. Not one did.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," whispered Briggs.

It took twenty more minutes of nonstop destruction for the Imperials to force their way through the Hapan blockade. Only one of Davek's star destroyers was lost, while more than half of the Hapan ships were destroyed or crippled. The rest fell back for the capital. When *Invincible* jumped to hyperspace, Allana saw Davek's body wilt. He turned around and found her eyes from across the bridge. He shook his head slowly. He looked so very tired, and the worst fighting was ahead.

Allana drifted across the deck until she was close enough to lay a hand on his shoulder. She leaned close and whispered, "Just hold on a little longer. I can't thank you enough for this."

He smiled weakly. "I thought *you* needed encouragement."

"We all do. But this is my fight."

"It's mine too," Davek said.

In his eyes she found resonance with her own feelings: the weight of command and royal responsibility, mixed with the aching personal need to do right by the legacy of a mother. Allana had never known her cousin very well, but at that moment Davek understood her better than anyone.

"It's been an honor, Your Majesty," Allana squeezed his shoulder and released. "I have to get ready. May the Force be with you."

As he hurried to leave the bridge she heard General Briggs called for the whole deck to hear. "Thirty-two standard minutes until we reach Hapes! Set your timers! Repeat, thirty-two minutes and we start again."

When Vitor stepped onto *Invincible's* bridge he found it in a lull. His father was easy to spot. Davek had ditched the ceremonial robes he'd never liked in favor of a gold-braided version of an admiral's uniform, elegant and functional at once.

As he walked across the deck toward his father Vitor let his gaze pass over the rest of the bridge. The scene seemed packed with vivid detail: The lieutenant at the tactical station, hunched over his console, running last-minute checks. A row of comm officers relaying different orders to the other ships. The yellow-skinned Ansonian in the gunnery pit talking quietly and fast on his headset. The young ensign two stations down, anxiously biting her nails. Every scrap of life seemed precious when you were about to die.

The thought was enough to made his chest tight with fear, but since his dream he'd almost become used to that feeling. When he stepped up in front of his father he snapped his father a firm salute.

"Vitor! You should get down to the hangar. You have to be ready to deploy as soon as we enter the system." His words were a reprimand, his tone pleasantly surprised.

"I don't think they'll taking off first thing," Vitor said.

"You're right. We'll have to clear the way." Davek clapped his son the shoulders and looked him up and down. Like the rest of the Imperial Knights who'd be going down there, Vitor was dressed in scarlet body armor. He'd left off the ceremonial cape for this mission but added a utility belt heavy with blaster, grappler, and other tools. A cortosis buckler, made from the armor of Veers' stormtroopers, was attached to his right forearm.

"I just wanted to stop by and see you before I went down," Vitor explained.

"I understand," his father nodded seriously, which couldn't be further from the truth. "Watch out for your brother and Marin. They'll watch out for you."

"I know."

It was suddenly hard to speak. He told himself he'd come up here just to see his father one last time. He wouldn't try to say goodbye here. He'd recorded farewell messages on a collection of data rods and left them with the rest of his things in *Invincible's* barracks. He'd made them carefully, saying all he thought was important.

But as he looked in his father's eyes for the last time, Vitor felt he had to say something. Davek saw him struggling, and he saw pure paternal care in the emperor's face, and he bleated out, "Take care, Dad. I love you."

It was so simple and direct and honest. Neither of them talked that way often. Davek squeezed his shoulders one last time, leaned close, and said softly, "I love you too, son. Get going. I'll see you later."

Vitor nodded, turned, and walked away. He didn't risk looking back at his father one more time. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop the tears if he did.

In all his deployments as an Imperial Knight, Roan Fel had never taken part in an amphibious assault and he'd certainly never been dropped into an ocean from lower orbit. He'd thought himself an experienced veteran at seventeen, but the universe always had another surprise for him.

*Invincible* had room in its kilometers-long main hangar for a half-dozen heavy drop ships, most of which were filled with Imperial infantry and weapons for aquatic warfare. Once the fleet jumped clear of the Arabanth system, Allana Djo and a company of well-armed Hapan exiles boarded the most well-armored drop ship. Roan and the other Imperial Knights were tasked with protecting Allana, so they all boarded with her except for Vitor, who surprised them by announcing a last-minute run up to the bridge.

Roan resisted the urge to join him and say goodbye to their father. Instead he joined the Hapans in boarding one of the aquatic armored transports ready to be deployed from the drop ship. Each vehicle used the main body of a traditional AT-AT walker with the legs removed and water-based propulsion systems added. The aquatic transports were just as heavily armored, and as the passengers took their seats and strapped into their crash webbing Roan calculated that the riskiest part of deployment would be getting close to the planet. He had no way to know what was going on outside the cramped hold, and he'd get little warning when the time came to drop.

When Vitor showed up it made him feel a little better. His brother dropped into the last open seat beside him and secured the restraints over his armor.

"Any idea when we'll reach Hapes?" Roan asked.

"I don't know. I think we were about ten minutes away."

Roan didn't like waiting. He looked at the aisle across from them. Not many had joined them in the drop ship, but his cousins Marin and Nat were strapped in side-by-side. He caught Marin and Vitor exchanging glances, but no words. Nat was alert and anxious. He'd balled up his messy blonde hair into a ponytail and while the Jedi hadn't taken up suits of plasteel armor like the Imperial Knights, he'd at least ditched the awkward monastic robes and added a cortosis buckler. Marin had done better, donning scarlet *beskar* plates received from the other side of her family.

Roan looked over the Jedi's heads at the rows beyond. The Hapans took up the entire front section of the hold and he could spot two red-haired crowns side-by-side marking to Allana and Tanith Zel. The black head beside theirs was probably Elliah's. When the heavy fighting started Allana, as a Jedi, would at least be able to defend herself. Roan would keep an extra eye on Elliah.

The waiting drew out long and became agonizing. Roan didn't even know if they'd left hyperspace yet. In a low voice he asked Vitor, "How was father?"

"He's handling it."



His brother's voice was level, almost dull, and he looked straight ahead, seemingly into nothing. Vitor had been acting distracted for a long time now and Roan didn't know why. He'd seemed to have gotten more focused after Zonama Sekot but now it was like he was losing it again. Roan still wanted to know but this wasn't the time to pry. He'd get his explanation once this was all done.

"Just stay on target," Roan told him. "Once today's done, our fight will *really* be over."

"Yes," Vitor said seriously. "I know it will."

Another silence drew out. Then the hold rattled. Through its armored bulkheads they could hear rumbling like distant thunder. Violence still seemed far away but Roan knew the wait was over.

Across the aisle, Nat Skywalker whispered, "Showtime."

The view from *Invincible's* bridge was a grim panorama. As Davek had expected from the relatively light opposition thus far, Serissa had elected to gather the bulk of her forces around Hapes itself. She'd known exactly what vector he'd attack from and had raised three layers of walls between him and the planet. Battle Dragons, Nova cruisers, and more were gathered by the dozens.

He waited until the tactical team could tally the enemy fleet before giving orders. His force still outgunned the Hapans, especially with *Invincible* in its arsenal, but it would be a very fierce fight. His goal was simple: get close enough to the planet to deploy his ground teams. *Invincible* alone, mighty as it was, would get torn to pieces by all those Battle Dragons unless he could find a weak spot in their wall and break through with proper cover.

He knew the Hapans would do whatever possible to block *Invincible's* advance, so he ordered his flagship to hang back at first and sent three task forces ahead to attack different points in the enemy's wall. Davek watched the tactical displays as a trio of massive brawls erupted and waited to see if the Hapans would start to redistribute their forces to defend the attacked zones. Battle Dragons and Nova cruisers began to shift position, but not as much as he'd hoped. The Hapan ships in the second and third layers of

their barrier changed instead, with clusters of ships forming behind the attacked points on the first wall. It was a smart strategy, Davek thought, and one that would buy the Hapans more time, but they'd need all three layers to stop *Invincible*.

When the task forces commanded by Captain Korak and Captain Yorus broke holes in the first wall and pushed through, Davek ordered Briggs to take *Invincible* in also. He'd initially planned to break through a fourth point in the wall, but since the Hapans had refused to give him an easy opening he decided to push through the one made by Korak's ships. The captain's force was already smashing hard against the second wall, and through the bridge's viewport Davek could see space light up past *Invincible's* bow.

"*Nightwatch* reports she is taking having fire," Briggs informed him. "Six Nova cruisers cut their advance. The Battle Dragons are starting to release missile volleys."

"Stars launching fighter and bomber wings. See if they can't help with those Novas. Once they're done, take us in range of the Battle Dragons."

"Gladly, sir."

*Invincible* was vastly more powerful than any vessel Davek had commanded before and also more complex. Briggs had learned how to coordinate operations impressively fast, but Davek knew that the officers and crew, hastily compiled from other ships, might get overwhelmed when fighting got fierce. He had engaged against this ship in multiple battles and he knew the key to foiling it was fast, distracting attack runs that prevented smaller ships from getting caught in slug-fests. The Novas would be better at that than the Battle Dragons, and Davek watched as his bomber wings began chasing down and pummeling the Hapan cruisers.

"Majesty, Captains Yorus and Nesdor report their task forces are running hard against the second wall," Briggs said, and directed his attention to the other points on the tactical display.

"Have them withdraw to the outer edge of the combat zone but do *not* disengage."

"You don't want them to form up on us?"

"No, I want them to keep the ships from the first wall busy so they don't all come around on our aft. Understood?"

Briggs nodded and relayed the order. Davek turned his attention back to the fight dead ahead. *Nightwatch* and Korak's other ships were still taking heavy fire but *Invincible's* TIE Demolishers had destroyed two Nova cruisers and crippled a third. The remaining ones were falling back to the Battle Dragons, and Davek could see that most of the second and third wall was now folding in on them, ready to attack from all sides.

"All ships, press ahead now," Davek commanded. "Don't let them slow us down."

As more Hapan ships closed on their aft and flanks, the Imperials formed a tight formation and charged. *Invincible* crept to the tip of the spearhead and used its mighty firepower to pummel the Battle Dragons arranged to stop them. The Hapans attempted to withstand its volleys for only a few minutes before drawing back, but Davek ordered his ships to keep firing. Allana wanted to end this fight with as few Hapans dead as possible; that was right and good for their monarch, but Davek was fighting to win, and even a damaged enemy could come back on him. Once they got close to Hapes and deployed the drop ships they'd find themselves pinned to the planet by Hapan ships still eager to destroy them. Davek wanted to cut their numbers as low as possible before the battle moved to that stage.

After *Invincible* pushed through the second wall it hit the third. Explosions flared on all sides and the command deck started to rock as the super star destroyer's shields absorbed heavy volleys from Battle Dragons brave enough to engage it. The Hapans still hadn't started using Nova cruisers for fast, distracting attacks, though some Miy'til fighters and bombers had begun long-shot runs for the bridge.

"General Briggs, let's tighten the fighter screen," Davek said. "How are our bombers looking?"

"Still chasing the last Novas, sir."

"Have them form up with the Demolishers from *Nightwatch* and send them to knock out the Battle Dragons up ahead. If we can push through those, we should be able to get to the planet."

As Briggs relayed his orders Davek looked out the viewport. Hapes itself had swelled so he could see its blue oceans, lazy cloud-drifts and serene continents in detail. As another layer of explosions obscured his view, Davek asked Briggs, "What kind of orbital defenses are we looking at?"

"Very modest, sir. There look to be a half-dozen orbital defense platforms roughly analog to Golan IIIs. We're detecting a local shield over the major cities, including the Chume'Dan."

Davek was glad intel from the loyalists hadn't proved wrong. Centuries of seclusion and security inside the Transitory Mists meant the Hapans skimmed out on planetary defense in favor of mobile assets. The fighting would be continuous and fierce even after he deployed drop ships, but at least he wouldn't have to deal with heavy fire from the planet.

A bright flare off *Invincible's* port bow made him shield his eyes. Tactical announced that one of their own destroyers had just burst apart after taking heavy fire from three Battle Dragons. The double-disc warships dove down on the super star destroyer, this time with three more Novas to help. Davek scowled as more explosions scattered across their shields and rocked the bridge. *Invincible* could handle this attack, but if it slowed them down too much they'd be mobbed from behind.

Captain Korak brought *Nightwatch* and two of his smaller destroyers to help. The Hapans were forced to split targets, half defending and half attacking, and even after Korak's barrages tore apart the first Battle Dragon the other two stood fast and continued their assault on *Invincible*. After another tremor the bridge crew reported down shields and hull breaches, but thankfully nothing near the command section.

The tactical display lit up with some good news. The bombers teams had succeeded in crippling the Battle Dragons sitting dead ahead, which meant the time had come for the final charge to the planet.

"All ships, best speed ahead," Davek commanded. "Tell the ground teams to stand by for deployment."

Briggs eagerly got to it. *Invincible*, *Nightwatch* and the others pointed their noses for Hapes and pressed on, leaving the damaged Battle Dragons to chase them. The ships under Yorus and Nesdor were hanging back on the edge of Hapes' gravity well and continued to keep the enemy from the initial wall busy, but the second and third walls were folding fast around Davek's ships. He only hoped the ground teams could neutralize Serissa quickly and keep this bloody fight from drawing on too long.

Hapes grew larger until it filled most of the viewport. While other destroyers moved to attack the orbital defense stations, *Invincible* dropped lower over the planet. Briggs reported that a cloud system was currently over the Chume'Dan but their sensors clearly marked the Fountain Palace and the energy shield's protective dome.

One glance at the tactical holo told Davek the Hapans ships were closing fast and would soon resume firing on *Invincible*. It was now or never.

"General Briggs," he said, "Are in position to deploy?"

"Five minutes until we're directly above the target."

"The drop ships can make up the difference. Launch now."

"Right away, Majesty."

*Invincible* shifted position so its dorsal side faced away from the planet, toward the encroaching wall of Hapan ships. He couldn't see Hapes and couldn't see the drop ships as they launched from *Invincible's* ventral hangar. He simply held his breath until Briggs announced the ground teams were away. Then he released it. He'd done his part and fought the fight his mother had wanted.

From here on out, it was up to Allana and his sons.

Marin Fel was neither a commando nor an ace pilot, but she'd done enough tricky maneuvers in her X-wing and she'd thought she'd be prepared for the dizzying inertia of a suborbital drop. She was dead wrong. During the long, tense wait to deploy, Vitor had explained to her and Nat that *Invincible's* six heavy drop ships would fall like

meteors through the upper atmosphere before finally engaging retro-burn engines to slow their descent. Just when they'd decreased speed enough to aim properly, the drop ships would release their cargo into the ocean from an altitude of five hundred meters. That was a long way to fall, even if you were in a heavily-armored submarine.

They got a warning before the initial drop, but not enough. Marin felt like her stomach was trying to jump from her chest and her brain out of her skull. Whatever inertial dampeners these drop ships had they weren't enough. Everything around her rattled violently as they tore like a fireball through the atmosphere. After a few agonizing minutes the shaking stopped but they were still falling. Deceleration came with no warning at all. Stomach and brain both tried jumping down. Several people in the hold-Knights, Hapans, Jedi, she couldn't tell- let out yelps of surprise. She might have been one of them. Then they were falling again, fast and hard and smooth, and when they smacked into the water she thought every wall would fall in and crush them. The initial tremors became smooth movement as the aquatic transport began pushing through the currents of Hapes' oceans.

"*Fierfek!*" Marin spat. "Have you done this before?"

Vitor was smiling, honestly smiling, like she was amusing him. "Can't say I have."

"Is it wrong if I thought that was fun?" asked Nat.

"Yes. Very wrong." She looked to Vitor. "What happens now?"

"Let me check." Vitor reached to the bulkhead behind him and tapped the controls on the comm panel. "This is the hold. Can we get a sitrep?"

"All teams deployed," a crisp voice said. "Approaching target at optimal speed, north-north west. Depth, three hundred meters. Time to target approximately eleven minutes."

"Thank you, pilot." Vitor switched off the comm. "Answer your question?"

"Mostly. Do we know what defenses they have along the coast?"

"We don't have a clue," a woman said, matter-of-fact, from a few rows behind her. Taryn Zel, probably.

"These transports are made to handle a fight," Vitor told her. "We also have seatroopers ready to deploy if we need them."

He sounded dead-confident they'd reach land safe. He was waiting to die elsewhere. Marin still couldn't accept Vitor's aplomb. She was determined to keep him alive through the coming battle and didn't let herself entertain thought of failure. That was a black pit she couldn't afford to fall down.

Suddenly the entire ship lurched. Her crash webbing barely kept her from spilling onto Nat. As she steadied herself by gripping the restraints that pilot's cool, crisp voice came back on the speaker. "The enemy is dropping concussion depth charges from the surface. Conducting evasive maneuvers. Please stand by for turbulence."

She looked at Nat. "Still having fun?"

"Not really." His voice trembled.

"Hang in there," Vitor told them. "We're just getting started."

Davek's heart beat fast until confirmation came that all the drop ships had deployed their assault teams as planned. Once he knew his sons were in the water safely, he allowed his attention to return to the Hapan ships encroaching his on all sides as they sat with their backs to the planet. This would be a long and difficult fight, but also a simple one. All he had to do was hold.

He had no better shield than *Invincible* itself, and he gave the order to edge the ship outward so it faced the enemy with a seventeen-kilometer port flank bristling with cannons. Davek then ordered his fighter wings to create a defensive screen around his flagship while the supporting destroyers hung behind *Invincible's* starboard side, closer to the planet. If the Hapans tried to slip backup forces of their own down to the Chume'dan, or if Davek's ground troops needed reinforcements, they'd be ready to act. *Invincible* would take a heavy beating but it was built for that, and just the sight of the super star destroyer gave the Hapans visible pause. They slowed their advance to a crawl and began to shift formation in preparation for the next advance.

As Davek watched all the red markers rearrange on the tactical display, he was surprised to see a single green one dropping out of

the swarm. The computer marked it as an Imperial frigate being chased by a trio of Nova cruisers.

"Tactical, what's going on there?" he pointed at the holo. "Can we hail that ship?"

"One second, Majesty." The lieutenant tapped her earpiece and tried to patch in a comm line to her counterpart on the frigate. She was young, as young as Davek had been when he'd held the same position aboard *Voidwalker*. Back then he'd constantly been back and forth on his headset with his counterpart on *Shieldbreaker*, the woman with the soothing face whose face he never got a chance to see. He hadn't thought of Lieutenant Pelky in years; strange that she'd come up now.

"They're identifying as the frigate *Swordbearer*, *Kontos*-class. From Captain Yorus' strike team. They said they got stuck in the swarm and are badly damaged. They need cover."

Davek didn't want to break formation but he didn't want to abandon the ship to die either. Despite the massive dreadnaught he commanded from now, he could never forget that all his accomplishments had started with a frigate just like that. "Pull a full fighter wing off the line to intercept. TIE-Xs, Sabers, Demolishers. Ask *Swordbearer* if they'll need assistance."

"Yes, Majesty."

Davek watched the tactical display as dozens of starfighters rushed out to help the fleeing frigate. The Nova cruisers were crowding it on every flank and they seemed to be giving it a good pounding. They didn't seem to have brought a fighter screen with them, and soon the Hapans were the ones taking heavy fire from the TIE Demolishers. The attacks forced the Novas to slow, which in turn allowed *Swordbearer* to lurch closer to the friendly line. The TIEs kept up their attacks until all three Novas turned and headed back the way they'd came.

"Tell the TIEs to break pursuit," Davek said. "Call them back on the line. What's the status on *Swordbearer*?"

"They're reporting severe damage, heavy casualties. They're requesting to offload their wounded."



"Understood. Tell them to dock with *Nightwatch*. Alert Captain Korak to prep his medical bays."

"Yes, Majesty."

Davek glanced at the tactical holo. The Hapan line was still holding back, but he doubted they'd hesitate much longer. *Swordbearer*, meanwhile, was crossing past *Invincible* and vectoring toward *Nightwatch*. Davek stepped away from the tactical station to get a better look out the forward viewport. He saw the frigate's familiar angular form cutting high above the super star destroyer's bow, about halfway down from the bridge. Even from seven kilometers away, Davek could make out the black scars that had ripped open *Swordbearer*'s hull and the ugly gouges left by exploding missile canons. The little ship had endured despite that. Just looking at it gave him an acute pang of nostalgia.

Then a huge fireball tore through the aft section of the frigate. Its bow went drifting ahead, pushed through the vacuum by the force of the explosion. Debris spiraled away from the point of explosion and scattered against *Invincible*'s shields.

Davek spun back to the tactical lieutenant. "What the hell happened?"

"We got a message right before it blew, sir." The girl's face had gone pale. "They said they were having problems with their engines, some kind of reactor leak."

"Tractor beams, move that debris out before it hits anyone!" Briggs called. "Do we have escape pods?"

"They said they were evacuating," the tactical lieutenant said meekly.

"Escape pods confirmed. Over a dozen," someone in the crew pit reported.

"Then reel them in and bring their people aboard," said Davek. "Tell sick bay to prep for casualties."

He wondered what fraction of the crew had survived. A *Kontos*-class had an optimal crew of eleven hundred; he'd never forget that number. He'd managed to get seven-hundred and sixty-two home aboard *Voidwalker*. The number of survivors from *Swordbearer* was

going to be much lower, and his heart went out to the crew who'd fought hard only to fail.

Then Briggs directed his attention to the tactical holo. "Majesty, the Hapans are advancing."

"So they are," Davek breathed. That red swarm was coming at them on all sides. The battle would rejoin in moments. No time for second-hand grief. He tore his thoughts away from tough little ships to focus on the fight.

When the escape pod's hatch was wrenched open from the outside, the first faces Korosh Vull saw belonged to two frazzled ensigns and one white-clothed medic whose evaluating eyes swept over all thirteen people crammed inside the capsule.

"Please, don't panic," the medic said, as much to ensigns as the escapees. "Does anyone need immediate medical attention?"

"We've got a couple scrapes and bruises, but nothing serious," Vull said. "Some of the other pods might be worse."

The ensigns reached their hands out. Vull grabbed one and let the younger man pull him out of the escape hatch and onto the deck.

"Where are we? What ship is this?" asked Nair, a man in corporal's bars behind Vull.

"This is *Invincible*, sir. Welcome aboard."

Vull wasn't used to hearing the ship's old name. He steadied himself and clamped a hand on the medic's shoulder. "How many other pods made it?"

"I believe fourteen are recoverable. I can't vouch for their condition."

Fourteen pods, a dozen survivors each. That meant hundreds still dead on *Oathkeeper*. Vull had hoped it would go better. He'd hoped that, once the three Nova cruisers chased their battered frigate back to *Invincible's* protective cover, the super star destroyer would allow them to send ostensibly injured crew aboard. They'd been ordered instead to dock with another warship, which would gain them nothing, so they'd been forced to fall back on the self-destruct device they'd hastily rigged before joining this mad battle.

Anyone who analyzed the wreckage would tell the explosion inside *Oathkeeper* had come from a concussion warhead attached to the main power core and rigged to blow, but Fel's people had more important things to do right now.

The explosion had been bigger and more lethal than intended, but it has certainly met its goal. Vull and the other Oathkeepers who'd stuffed into escape pods at the start of the battle were exactly where they needed to be. It was tragic that so many crew had perished with the ship, young Captain Leland among them, but once Vull accomplished his mission here, the ones who'd escaped might wish they'd died with their comrades. Whatever fate brought next, imprisonment or execution, at least they'd done something more than surrender pathetically at Kovix-589. They could be proud of that.

The medic scoured the men and women who came crawling out of the escape pod. He marked several with burn, bruises, and skin lacerations, most of them honestly earned. Darth Kroan had promised the Nova cruisers would make the pursuit look real, and they certainly had. At a few points Vull had been afraid he'd be killed by overzealous Hapans before reaching *Invincible*.

"Alright, you, you, you, and you," the medic said, "Come with me. We've got beds for you in sickbay. You'll get a full look-over."

"What about the rest of us?" asked a lieutenant, Zaydis.

"Where can we find out who else made it off?" asked Nair.

The medic began leading them down the hall, walking backwards as he talked. "We've set aside a room for those without visible injuries, not far from the medical bay. Other escape pods are being recovered now. Please, come with me."

As the medic led them down a series of hall, Vull examined every bulkhead and intersection, trying to play their location within *Invincible*. The ship's entrails were a huge maze and despite living here for eight years he didn't know all of them. After glimpsing a few deck markers over doorways he estimated they'd been reeled in to some airlocks on the star destroyer's dorsal hull, starboard side, about four kilometers down from the bridge. That would mean a

decent trek, but they were all wearing standard Imperial uniforms, indistinguishable from Fel's own crew.

The medic announced they were almost at the sick bay right after Vull guessed as much. When they came to a branching point the medic and one ensign began escorting the wounded toward sick bay.

"Everyone *without* major industries, please follow me," the second ensign announced, then turned down the other branch.

Vull dropped behind a man named Locum, patted him in the back, and whispered, "Take one for the team, Corporal."

"Yes, sir," the young man said firmly, then picked weight off one leg and tilted it so it rested on the edge of his boot's sole.

Vull stomped down on the ankle. Locum grunted and almost fell, but Vull already had an arm around his back and kept him up.

"Wait, wait!" he called. "I think we've got a sprained ankle!"

The two ensigns rushed back into view. Locum growled, "Thought I was doing okay... but... stang, I can't stand."

"We'll get you to sick bay," one ensign said as he grabbed Locum from the other side. The second touched Vull's arm and said, "We'll take him. The room for you's down that hallway. Turn a left at the end, and the door's ten meters down. Some of your people are probably there already."

"Got it." Vull slipped away and let both ensigns hoist Locum up. "We can't thank you enough."

"Just doing our part, sir."

They were indeed. Shaken but still professional, ideal Imperial officers. They deserved to serve a better man. Maybe that would happen after today, maybe not. That wouldn't be for Vull to decide.

He knew his men were tempted to stop by that meeting room, to see who of their comrades had survived and maybe gather allies, but they wouldn't risk being waylaid by more of Fel's people. They'd lost the first set easily enough but they couldn't count on luck. He had eight men left, able-bodied and mostly equipped with standard-issue, unremarkable sidearms. That would be enough.

His men seemed to know that too. After the medic, ensigns, and wounded Oathkeepers were out of sight, the remaining ones all turned to Vull.

"Do you know where we are, sir?" asked Zaydis.

"Close enough. I can get us to the bridge from here. Remember, don't hurry and don't do anything to stand out."

"Do we want to look for weapons?" Nair asked.

"Keep alert and don't risk grabbing something if it would draw too much attention. Now fall behind me and let's march."

He'd lived on this ship for years. Even if Fel's people had wiped and replaced the most elite security codes, Vull still knew ways to get them close to the bridge without drawing attention. Once they succeeded in getting that far, they would do what they'd come here to do. And after that, finally, their war would be over.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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Viewed from the bridge of the *Thrawn*, the ancient ice drifting particles that surrounded Shedu Maad looked like layers of a silver veils, and the only black space marking clear passage lay dead ahead. The planet itself was dead in the center of that channel, a tiny blue dot that looked almost inviting.

Marasiah knew better. Though they weren't visible from this distance, the *Thrawn*'s sensors had picked up over a thousand proton mines clogging the passage. They were spaced enough apart that starfighters could easily maneuver around them to reach the planet, but the fleet of star destroyers gathered outside the icy veils had no hope of avoiding them.

Still, what lay ahead looked more welcoming than what lay behind. Admiral Jaeger's ships arrived quickly in the Maad system to prevent the Sith from evacuating their base, but the Hapans had responded quickly too. Battle Dragons and Nova cruisers had micro-jumped to their position from behind gas giants further out in the system and were now ringing the Imperial fleet. The Imperials possessed a numeric advantage, and their enemy had nothing near as mighty as the eight-kilometer *Thrawn*, but the Hapans were fiercely throwing themselves against the destroyers on the outer edge of Jaeger's formation.

Marasiah stood beside the admiral as both stood at the tactical holo, taking it in. She muttered, "I wish we could get a better reading on what's near the planet."

"We're not detecting any capital ships so far."

"No, but they might be behind the planet's ecliptic."

"Perhaps." Jaeger looked at her. "Your Majesty, now might be as good a time as any to take your people down the passage. The Hapans haven't reached the *Thrawn* yet so you can launch unmolested."

Marasiah was wary of what their sensors were missing: more mines, some hidden Battle Dragons, or snubfighters whose heat signatures were washed out by the icy veils. At this point charging into the unknown really was the best option. Jaeger and his fleet would hold the Hapans as long as possible while she and the Jedi did their part.

"Thank you, Admiral," she said. "I'll go down to the hangar and get ready to deploy."

"Good luck, Majesty."

Marasiah pivoted to face him. Over the past eight years she'd gradually gotten used to the formal, obeisant vows people gave her, but she'd known Jaeger for much longer than that. Just when it looked like the admiral might dip himself forward she snapped a salute. He blinked, paused, and saluted back, soldier to soldier, equal to equal. Just like it had been, when all this had started.

Marasiah lowered first, turned, and hurried from the bridge.

Arlen had been strapped in *Starlight Champion's* pilot seat for the past several hours but gone nowhere. The interior of the *Thrawn's* main hangar was getting to be a pretty boring sight and he was more than ready to get this mission underway, but at least he felt good beside with his old Master again. Lowbacca had squeezed into the co-pilot's chair and his son Karrash was strapped in behind him. Yeris Ular, the Mirialian Jedi who'd helped his mother on Zonama Sekot, rounded out the cockpit crew, while more Jedi were crammed in the main hold.

Lowbacca had been recounting his experience with Shedu Maad in a series of thoughtful moans and growls. The Jedi had first come here to hide from the combined forces of the Empire and the Alliance, as led by Arlen's uncle after he'd become Darth Caedus. The Jedi and their Hapan friends- commanded then by a Jedi queen- had lured Caedus to the Maad system and it was there he'd been killed by Arlen's mother. The entire experience had been heartbreaking for Lowbacca, almost as bad as for Jaina herself, and the sixty-year-old pain shone through in the Wookiee's voice.

Arlen was struck by how the current battle was a weird inversion of the one before. He'd never liked irony when it hit so close to home.

Shortly after Lowbacca finished his tale, the Grand Master let things lull into a quiet. That quiet was broken by a light on Arlen's comm console. He opened the link himself and said, "This is *Champion*."

"We're clear to deploy," Marasiah said. "Start your engines and prepare for launch."

"About damn time," Arlen breathed. "Will comply."

As he turned off the link Lowbacca was already working the co-pilot's controls and warming the thrusters and repulsorlifts. The Wookiee had been quite a mechanic in his youth and he seemed to relish the chance to run through *Champion's* systems and start them up one-by-one. For Arlen it was a reminder of much simpler times when he'd been a mere apprentice and Lowbacca just his teacher. He hoped that old optimism and energy would be with them as they slipped and wound their way through the mine-choked passage.

Once they were sure everything was good to go- repulsors, engines, shields, weapons- they had to wait five more minutes before Marasiah hailed again. "Arlen, you're with the first push. Are you ready to launch?"

Lowbacca trilled loudly and Arlen translated, "More than ready."

"Excellent. You may clear out when ready."



Arlen kicked in the repulsors and lifted *Champion* off the flight deck. He retracted the landing gear and edged them forward to the hangar's broad open mouth. Six other ships similarly-sized to *Champion* were also ready to deploy, each one packed with over twenty Jedi. When he reached the exit Arlen dove out into the vacuum, extended *Champion*'s slanted wing, and adjusted pitch so his nose faced the entrance to the passage. He hung off the *Thrawn*'s flank and watched as six more Jedi ships emerged from the hangar behind him.

Lowbacca told him that *Champ*'s sensors were picking up the mines, albeit with difficulty. They hadn't detected any enemy ships in the passage, but there was not telling how accurate that reading was. Behind him, Karrash added that if there was a trap waiting, the only way to know was to spring it. Not what Arlen wanted to hear, but what he'd expected.

Marsiah hailed them again with an all-ship broadcast. "Jedi vessels, you're clear to appear Shedua Maad. Approach carefully and if you can destroy a mine without damaging your ships or others, do it. We'll be right with you."

"Glad to hear it," Arlen muttered. Then he kicked his engines to full and sent them right down the icy throat.

As *Jade Shadow* plunged into the mine-choked passage, Jade kept one eye on the five-light formation that marked *Champion*'s thrusters. It was no surprise that Arlen had volunteered to be the first Jedi ship into the minefield, and while she trusted his flying skills she wasn't quite comfortable knowing that the Grand Master was in that ship with him.

*Shadow* and the other Jedi ships followed Arlen and Lowbacca closely. Ships their size had to make only small adjustment to avoid the mines that choked the passage, and whenever possible they took long-range potshots to detonate the warheads safely. It was slow going, but the Jedi pilots were careful, their minds attuned so the seven craft moved fluidly through the danger zone.

Jade had handed *Shadow*'s controls to someone else for this. Ayen Qemar was one of the Order's best pilots and the blue-

skinned Nautolan had flown this ship before. The blonde woman Ceynar Valliss took the co-pilot's seat and manned weapons and comm. Jade was strapped in behind them, right next to Darth Terrid. The Sith had done nothing but sit in silence for the past few hours but Jade still had to watch him, with her eyes and with the Force. She didn't sense him trying to communicate with the Sith on Shedu Maad, but she could feel his other emotions: the simmering anger, the cold determination. He was remarkably free of the anxiety pulsing from ever Jedi on this ship. He seemed to be exactly where he wanted, and Jade didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

She hoped it was. She'd discovered that she *wanted* to trust Terrid. She didn't let that desire lead her or cloud her actions, but it was there. The memory of the young man he'd been was still with her, and it would be tragic if everything good in Wharn really had been irrevocably lost. She hoped and prayed that Jaina had been right, that Terrid was acting out the will of the Force in his own way.

*Shadow* and the other Jedi ships had passed more than halfway through the passage when Valliss reported that they were getting a clearer sensor-view of Shedu Maad.

"What do we have?" Jade asked, leaning forward a little in her crash webbing.

"Looks like a localized shield on the surface. Right where we thought it would be."

"Any ships in the area?"

"Not yet, but we can't tell if anything on the other side of the planet."

"I'm more worried about what's on the ground," Qemar said.

"No," Terrid whispered.

It was his first word in hours. Jade looked at him. "What do you mean?"

His red eyes narrowed. "There's Sith out there. In space. They're trying to hide themselves, but I feel them."

Valliss checked the scanners. "I'm only picking up those mines in the passage, but those ice particles are really... Wait—"

Jade reached out into the faint Force-meld connecting all the Jedi in the strike team. After she send a flash of vague warning, the best she had to offer, she asked Terrid, "Anything more?"

"No. But they're... close."

"Not what I want to hear," said Qemar.

"Just keep steady. Follow Arlen. Valiss, tells the Imperials to-

"Damn," the woman snapped. "They're coming from the ice-fields!"

Jade caught the first flash of lasers spearing toward *Starlight Champion*. The ship ahead dodged them and fired back, and Jade traced the path of its lasers until she spotted the far-off engine-flare of what looked like two starfighters.

"More coming out!" Valiss announced, right before a spray of lasers hit *Jade Shadow* and buffeted its shields.

Qemar swore and wrestled with the controls. Valiss took control of the turret cannon and tried to track the ships. Jade leaned forward and peered out the cockpit to catch two starfighters that looked vaguely like angular versions of Hapan Miy'tils.

"We call them Furies," Terrid said.

"How wonderfully *Sith*," said Valiss.

"They may be using shadow bombs. Watch for them."

"Understood," said Qemar.

Jade lost track of *Starlight Champion* as her own ship took a series of wild turns and dives. More explosions rocked their shields, but defense held. A lighter tremor shook the ship next and something on Valiss' console lit up.

"Damn," the woman breathed, "Just lost the *Warrior*."

"Shot down?" asked Jade.

"Looks like they triggered a mine while evading. Ayen-

"You don't have to remind me," the Nautolan said. "Just shoot!"

"I *am* shooting. Those Imps had better get here soon."

Jade glanced at Terrid. He was still eerily calm, and he'd closed his eyes as though dropping into meditation. She felt him reaching out with the Force, but not into the Jedi meld. He could only be reaching out to the Sith and she was about to slap him on the arm

and jar him out of it when Valiss announced, "Got two! They just flew into my shots!"

Terrid's eyes opened. "They got distracted."

"What did you do?" asked Jade.

"Only alerted them to my presence. The surprise was enough to make them loose concentration," Terrid said coolly. "They *did* think I was dead."

"Yeah, well, thank for the help," Valiss laughed nervously. Qemar seemed relieved too; like most of the Jedi she'd suspected Terrid's motives the whole time.

Jade wasn't surprised by his actions, only that he seemed to take no joy from killing two Sith. Maybe his lust for vengeance was localized on Krayt and Wyyrlok; maybe revenge wasn't as fulfilling as he'd hoped.

"Two more coming up behind us," Valiss announced.

"How's *Champion* doing?" asked Jade.

"They've got clear backs. Looks like they're almost at the end of the passage."

Jade looked out the viewport. As stars and silver ice-veils swung back and forth with their maneuvers she tracked the sphere of Shedu Maad, now tantalizingly close.

Something harder than laser blasts slammed into their shield. As the cockpit shook Valiss announced, "That was a warhead!"

"Shadow bomb," Terrid said simply.

"How many behind us?" asked Jade.

"Two."

"Hard to dodge a torp if you can't see it coming," Qemar muttered. "Shields might take another but not more."

"Keep bobbing and weaving," Terrid said. "It will be harder for the Sith to land bombs."

Qemar did just that. The view from the cockpit was dizzying and she wove *Jade Shadow* into convoluted twists and turn to evade a bomb that might not be coming. At the same time the Furies were launching volleys of laserfire that impacted on their aft shields without taking them out. Valiss struggled to land shots with the

turret and the Sith pilots didn't seem to be falling for Terrid's distraction this time.

Help came from another direction. Valiss announced that one Sith ship had just exploded, and then another, and then three new fighters soared past *Shadow's* bow. With four dagger-shaped solar panels stabbing forward from each spherical cockpit, each TIE Saber looked like a fistful of knives. Jade was glad they were on the Jedi's side.

Valiss flipped on the comm. "Thanks for cleaning off those Furies."

"The path ahead appears open," Marasiah told them. "We'll go ahead and see if we can get beneath the shield perimeter."

"The canyon running past the Sith Temple is wide enough for any of the ships we've brought," Terrid said.

"We will take our fighters first," Marasiah said simply and killed the link.

Terrid settled in his chair, not bothered by her distrust. Now that they were through the passage, Jade sensed he was back to calmly waiting, almost like he was conserving himself for the greater challenge ahead. For once, she conceded he might be on to something.

As Shedu Maad filled Marasiah's entire viewport its surface features resolved in detail: light-blue oceans, dark-blue mountain chains and dusty deserts, clusters of green forests, no cities at all. Her sensors marked the active shield generator on the northern hemisphere as the only sign of civilization.

She also hadn't encountered any enemies since passing through the ice-field, but she was certain more laid ahead. Yarin Sept and Katrin Mulk formed tight on her flank as all three TIE Sabers plunged into the atmosphere. Ten more Sabers were behind them, helping the remaining Jedi ships fight their way clear of the mines and Sith fighters. She wished she had a lot more ships behind her—say, every last fighter on the *Thrawn*—but she'd work with what she had.

She tapped her comm system to *Starlight Champion's* frequency and told Arlen, "We're beginning our attack run now. Stay back until we've neutralized their defenses."

His response was a Wookiee roar. Arlen said, "Understood. Good luck." Translation or addition, she'd never know.

She'd been told to drop to surface level a hundred kilometers east of the shield perimeter rather than approach it head-on. Supposedly she could put her fighter in an ancient canyon and ride it beneath the shields, all the way to the Sith temple, but she didn't trust their hostage to tell them the truth.

As the three Imperial Knights dove toward a landscape of green tree-patches and dark-blue rock, no missiles locked onto them and now alarms wailed in her cockpit. She spotted the canyon and it looked easily wide enough to fit three TIEs in side-by-side, but it might narrow later on.

"Skies look clear," Katrin said from her left flank. "No missiles either."

"Think intel was right?" asked Yarin.

"We'll find out either way," Marasiah said. "Dive in on my lead."

She pointed the tips of her solar panels toward the canyon and gently dove in. Her wingmates followed. Walls of layered blue stone rose steep on either side. They passed through at a steady speed that made it easy to follow the canyon's curves, most of which weren't very tight.

Just when she was starting to think this might be easy, Katrin reported, "Enemy fighters, coming in behind us."

"How many?"

"Three."

Marasiah checked her forward sensors. They'd be under the shield perimeter in moments. Once inside they could pull out of the canyon and begin dogfighting with the Sith fighters, but Darth Terrid had warned that missile towers scattered through the forest could shoot them down.

It might be a gamble they'd have to take. Yarin reported that the Sith fighters had dropped into the canyon behind them and were

approaching fast. Haste might make them reckless but there were no sharp turns ahead.

Just seconds after they slipped beneath the shield, the Sith Furies opened fire. Laser blasts splattered against Yarin and Katrin's shields but they held, for now. The canyon boxed them in and a sudden, sharp turn only helped them dodge the Furies' fire for a few seconds.

"Shields can't take much more," Yarin growled. "We need to pull up."

"Where's the damn generator?" asked Katrin.

"Intel says it's right by the Temple. It'll be guarded."

"Damn it, I need to pull out," warned Yarin.

"Watch out for the missile turrets."

"Anything's better than this. I'm going up!"

"Knight Two, with me," Marasiah said and pulled her joystick back.

She pulled up, out of the canyon, and followed Yarin's Saber as it roared skyward. Alarms sounded in her cockpit and she saw a set of missiles flare out from a patch of forest. They headed right toward her and she dove to meet them, spraying laserfire that caught and burst one warhead, then another. Her forward shields caught the flak from the explosions and she began strafing the forest with her lasers, cutting up rows of trees before hitting the missile tower, detonating its magazine, and turning it into a geyser of flame.

According to Terrid there were a lot more like it. Instead of soaring clear into the sky she kept low over the forest to evade the missiles towers' sensors and checked her own. Katrin had pulled low too and was following the bend of the canyon's edge as it wound toward the Sith Temple, still too distant to see. Yarin, however, was up high, being chased by two Sith Furies that prevented him from dropping down.

He was probably as good as dead but she had to at least try. "Two, stay on target, I'm after Three," she said, and peeled skyward. Alarms sounded in her cockpit: more missiles from the ground. She waited before evasive maneuvers and tore a clear, straight line

toward Yarin his two pursuers. The Imperial Knight was boxed in with nowhere to go but up, where the energy shield waited to smash him.

Marasiah got her lock, tapped her trigger, and unleashed two torpedoes at one of the Furies. The missiles from the ground were almost on her and he broke into a dizzying spin. The missiles had to slow to track her and she broke straight again, right for Yarin, just in time to see his Saber, and the Fury she'd fired at, both explode simultaneously.

Even through surprise and grief she knew what to do. Marasiah leveled herself out and flew straight across, right toward the falling debris from both fighters. She slipped past just before the wreckage came down but the missiles behind her were caught by it and detonated.

She tried to decrease altitude and get back to forests and the blue-stone canyon. Katrin had gone on ahead and retreated back into the pass, but more missiles were locking onto Marasiah. Two Furies had appeared behind her and slightly beneath, pounding her aft shields and preventing her from getting low, just as they'd done to Yarin. The missiles were coming up from beneath too and she did the only thing she could. She pulled up straight toward the invisible, lethal energy dome and tried to put the Furies between her and the missiles. The Sith ships matched her steep climb and, just like her, didn't slow even as she approached the shield wall. She watched those missiles on her sensors and prayed the steep climb would burn through their limited fuel before they could reach her.

And, just in time, they did. Marasiah killed power to engines and dropped. The g-force of the maneuver threatened to black her out but she saw the Furies jerk aside and appear in front of her as she dropped. She kicked in repulsors to soften her fall and fired a spray of lasers, followed by a single torp, that streaked out to one Fury, overwhelmed its ventral shields, and turned it into a fireball.

One left. She was still dropping, but slower than before. The Sith fighter followed with a dive, and she could see barely spotted something small drop from beneath its nose section. Her sensors, however, registered no approaching warhead.



Shadow bomb.

As all three feel toward the surface- Saber, Fury, unseen warhead- Marasiah reached out with the Force and found the last one. The Sith had grabbed it with the Force too and was nudging the bomb toward her as it fell.

She tilted her laser cannons and locked onto the Fury. The spray scattered across its shields and jarred it just hard enough for the pilot to lose concentration. Marasiah caught the shadow bomb with the Force and slowed its fall. The Sith fighter was falling faster from straight above and the shield-scatter over the cockpit cleared just in time for the pilot to see his own shadow bomb smash through the transparisteel and detonate.

As the explosion flowered above her, Marasiah restarted engines before she hit the ground. She came out of her dive and into a level run as smoothly as possible. She oriented toward the Sith Temple and accelerated over the treetops.

She was almost feeling confident when she saw her scanners. A full dozen Furies were approaching from the Temple and she couldn't spot Katrin. She might already be shot down. Marasiah tapped on her comm system to hail her other Knights but those Sith fighters would be on her in seconds. There was no way she could take twelve.

Then a rain of laserfire slanted from the sky and intercepted the Furies. A few Sith ships exploded. The rest scattered. They were pursued by a cluster of TIE Sabers coming straight from above. She checked her sensors and saw the shield dome was no longer above her.

"Knight Two, are you there?" she called. "Do you read?"

"I'm here, Knight One. Shield generator is down."

"Knight One, this is *Champion*," Arlen's voice sounded next. "We've cleared the perimeter."

"Understood," she sighed in relief. "There's still lots of missiles towers. Get your ships into the canyon and ride it to the Temple. We'll clear the air."

"Got it," Arlen said, and shut off the link in the middle of a Wookiee howl.

Marasiah switched her commlink to the Imperial Knights' channel and said, "All pilots, finish off the Furies, then drop altitude and take out those missile towers. Let's pull the Sith's teeth out one-by-one."

Darth Kheykid stood beside Darth Wyyrlok on the Sith temple's highest balcony. They watched explosions in the distant sky and heard the far-off thunder.

"I had hoped our defenses would hold longer," Kheykid admitted.

"We've convinced the Jedi we are serious. We've accomplished our main goal. Now come, Lord Kheykid. We must be ready for them."

The Barabel hissed agreement, but his eyes lingered on the flitting shapes and engine-flares of the approaching ships. When he followed Wyyrlok inside, he wondered if the Jedi were also ready to die.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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During the early stages of the battle for Hapes, the defending fleet had been savaged by Davek's super star destroyer. They seemed to have at last learned their lesson. Instead of attacking *Invincible* head-on, the Hapans did their best to slip past the rim of its range of fire and attack the smaller destroyers and support ships nestled closer to the planet. The Battle Dragons largely stayed on the edge of the combat zone and let the swifter Nova cruisers carry out assaults with the help of Miy'til fighters and bombers. Though some Battle Dragons were in position to do so, none seemed to be launching ships down to the planet to help defend the Chume'Dan. Either Queen Serissa's seat was repulsing the invaders on its own, or the attack hadn't begun in full yet. The battle was garbling *Invincible's* sensors and crippling its ability to communicate with the ground teams, but best Davek could tell, his sons hadn't engaged the enemy yet.

That moment was coming soon, and he prayed they'd stay safe when it came. While planning this campaign and forcing it ahead over the objections of many senior officers, he'd been forced to bury myriad doubts behind authoritative bluster. Hallis and Vennefara were right about the limited intelligence, the war-weary fleet, the confused messaging, and the unpredictable political fallout, but

what had bothered Davek the most was the thought that this last battle might cost him Marasiah or his sons. It would be unspeakably cruel to lose them now, after they'd survived eight years of conflict with the Restorationists.

He'd agreed to this campaign for all the lofty reasons he'd given in his public broadcast. Personal motives always ran beneath political, often deep but sometimes near the surface. Here they nearly breached into the open. He was doing this to honor his mother's dying wish, and to piece together his family. He'd been forced to break it apart; he'd not wanted to, but he'd done it. Maybe that damage was irreversible, but on Zonama Sekot it hadn't felt so, and on leaving that strange, mystic world he'd been more sure than ever that he'd have to try.

"Your Majesty, look at that," Briggs said, calling his attention to activity on the tactical holo.

Davek noticed that a trio of Battle Dragons were moving to engage a pair of *Pellaeon*-class destroyers located far past *Invincible's* stern. It would be a close match, favoring the Imperials, but he saw that the Battle Dragons were launching fresh wings of bombers that could tip the balance. As a firefight erupted around the five ships, he scanned the rest of the battlefield and made a decision.

"General, we've been sitting in the middle of this fight long enough. Let's put some fear into them."

"With our positioning, it will be difficult to engage them directly."

"Then hail Captain Korak. Tell him to bring *Nightwatch* around to help with those Battle Dragons. We'll push forward and engage the ships he was fighting."

Briggs looked over the tactical holo. Equivocally he said, "That should stir things up, sir."

"Then stir them. We brought Veers' monstrosity here to use it. We just need to stay in a position to help our people on the surface if they need it."

"As you command, Majesty."

Before Briggs slipped away Davek asked, "Any news from our people on the ground?"

"Still nothing, sir. The battle's interfering with our sensors and there seems to be localized jamming on the surface."

"All right. Keep me informed if anything changes."

"Of course, Majesty."

Being ignorant of his sons' status was as bad as being unable to help. Davek reminded himself that they'd both fought, been injured, been captured, and survived. They'd do their part down there, while he did his where he could. For emperors, princes, knights, and common soldiers, some duties were the same.

Fel's people had indeed wiped the old executive clearance codes from *Invincible's* security systems, but that merely slowed Korosh Vull and his Oathkeepers. It did not stop them. As they walked through the corridors hardly any of the officers and troopers they passed spared them a second glance. If they'd looked closely they might have noticed the wear on their old uniforms, the dirt and small cuts some had taken during the escape from the frigate, but none did. Vull knew from experience that in times of battle you automatically trusted every man and woman on your ship. You had to, when an outside enemy was after your life.

Vull had no idea what the state of the fight outside was. He knew from experience that even a ship this large could be rocked violently by missile barrages and turbolaser volleys, but nothing came. Perhaps the Hapans were holding back and waiting for reinforcements. Perhaps Fel's ground teams had already succeeded in neutralizing the queen, though Darth Kroan was in the Fountain Palace with her, and something told Vull that scarred black-cloaked Sith could give the best Imperial Knights a good fight.

As he navigated corridors and lift tubes that seemed increasingly familiar, Vull was tempted to detour and find a place to observe the battle, but he resisted. The goal was to reach the bridge, nothing else. What happened to Kroan and the Hapans didn't concern him. He did keep alert for a weapons locker, and as they

moved up toward the command section he wracked his memory, trying to recall the ones closest to the bridge.

He stopped his people nine levels below the bridge and directed them down a series of corridors he'd walked before. They were getting slightly-longer looks from passers-by here; two men in lieutenant's bars, one corporal, and five ensigns made for an unlikely combination, and Vull was sure some people noticed the wear of their uniforms.

That made this stop-by risky but also imperative. Memory had served him correctly: this room contained both lockers for weapons and lockers for armor. At the moment it was also gracefully deserted.

"Okay," Vull whispered, "Zaydis, Kolum, you've got the worst uniforms. Get yourself in whites. Get yourself *weapons*."

"What about us?" Nair waved his pistol.

"No. Only the stormies get rifles. If we've got anything but standard-issue sidearms we'll draw attention."

Zaydis and Kolum got out of their uniforms as fast as possible. Nair anxiously stood by the entrance and kept glancing down the hall, but no one came their way. Putting on stormtrooper armor wasn't an easy process, and the other Oathkeepers helped their two comrades get dressed as quickly as possible. Once they threw their helmets on, there was nothing to distinguish them from all the other stormies on *Invincible*.

That was a powerful weapon. Even when they'd known there was an intruder aboard this ship, the Restorationists had been unable to stop him from bringing Fel's fleet down on Kovix-589. When this was all over, Vull hoped someone would spare a second to appreciate the irony in all this.

"Stick your uniforms in the laundry chute," Vull said. "And Kolum, swap your rank badge with Nair's."

The corporal frowned but plucked off his badge and replaced it with the ensign's. "Why the demotion?"

"We've got one lieutenant, two stormies, and five ensigns now. Nothing unusual about that."

As Kolum and Zaydis armed themselves with blaster rifles a tremor took the chamber.

"Finally," Vull breathed. "I was wondering if the battle was ever going to restart."

"Will this make it easier or harder?" asked Nair.

"That depends how chaotic it is on the bridge. We want to get up there without drawing attention and get close enough to Fel. Wait until you're within four meters and be absolutely *sure* you can make the shot."

"Four meters?" Zaydis tapped his rifle-barrel. "That's cutting it pretty close."

"With everything else going on they should barely notice us. If you fire and miss, we're all wrecked. Four meters. Be *certain*. If you can get that, then you can fire when ready."

"Understood, sir," Kolum nodded eagerly.

Vull looked the seven men gathered around him. He'd been aboard their ship less than two weeks and he'd only known some of these men for a few hours. Their trust in him and each other, their selfless bravery, made him feel like a defender of the Empire again. It had been a long time since he'd felt that, and he'd forgotten how good it was.

"Gentlemen," he said, "It's been a privilege. Now let's get going."

Darth Kroan hadn't come this far just to end up a prisoner. He'd chafed at being forced to stay on Hapes during the battle, but had consoled himself that once Vull and his people got aboard *Invincible*, he'd be free to escape on his own ship, even if he had to fight his way through a squadron of Hapan guards. The arrival of Darth Maleth and four more Sith had changed that situation.

They'd come without Kroan being warned, though Darth Saydel had been expecting them. Most of the One Sith were gathered to defend Shedu Maad but Darth Wyyrlok hadn't abandoned Saydel after she'd helped in purging the traitors. Darth Maleth was prodigiously skilled at battle mediation and could drain fear and hesitation from the minds of the crew in the Hapan fleet.

The four younger Sith had been sent to protect Maleth if the enemy breached the inside of the Fountain Palace.

Saydel had arranged to keep Kroan separate from Maleth's Sith, but that wasn't enough to keep him protected from the old, powerful Lord's senses. Kroan had to consciously shield his Force aura from the others, and if he had to engage in battle with Saydel's guards he'd surely give himself away.

So he was trapped, forced to watch the battle via a private holo-link while Saydel, Maleth, and the other Sith gathered to observe from the command-and-communications hub located beneath the Palace. He gave Saydel credit where it was due; the quarters he was all but sealed in were almost as luxurious as the ones he'd used to keep on Kuat. Shimmersilk curtains and tapestried carpets weren't consolation when his fate was frustratingly out of his own hands.

He'd at least been able to watch as *Oathkeeper*, using the false ID code Vull had secured, staged its own destruction and launched its escape pods for *Invincible* to pick up. There was no telling how long it would take for Vull to reach Fel and there wasn't any guarantee of his success, but at least things were in motion.

A drawback of shielding his presence in the Force was that it hindered his ability to sense others. He marked Darth Saydel's arrival only when the door, which he'd kept locked, slid open without warning.

"I thought you were reigning in the C-in-C," Kroan said coolly. She was certainly dressed the part of regal overseer, wearing a high-necked gold and black dress that managed to look elegant and martial at once. Her lightsaber wasn't visible, but he was sure she kept it in the skirt's layered folds.

"Darth Maleth and Admiral Vahl had the situation well in hand," Saydel said.

"You call *that* well in hand?" He gestured to the holo-display, where *Invincible* and its task force were still holding strong against the Hapans. "I thought Maleth was supposed to make your minions fearless. Why aren't they throwing themselves at the enemy?"

"Maybe they're waiting for *your* minions to do their job. Once Fel is dead the Imperials will be confused. Then we will attack in



full. In the meantime I'm not going to throw Battle Dragons at *Invincible* to be destroyed. Even I have limited resources. I'm not going to waste my entire fleet."

"Speaking of fleets, how is yours faring at Shedu Maad?"

"They've blocked off most of the Imperials in the Throat. Some Jedi seem to have gotten through."

Kroan had more or less expected that. He glanced back at the display of the battle over Hapes. "I've done all I can. My people are aboard *Invincible* now and they'll succeed or fail on their own."

"How encouraging," Saydel said drolly.

"Perhaps I could have helped them more, if I weren't trapped here."

"Perhaps. But I'm not letting you go. That ship of yours is too valuable an escape ticket."

Of course it was. He couldn't tell if she was planning to hand him over to Maleth once this was over but he wouldn't be surprised. His still had his lightsabers: his own and the one he'd taken from Darth Heyd back at Orelon. If he really had to fight with them he would.

He wished he could tell what Saydel was planning. He wished he could open himself in the Force and read her mind. Instead he was left wondering and helpless, the exact fate he'd wished to avoid.

"I will return to the C-and-C now," Saydel announced. "Please enjoy yourself, Lord Kroan."

He didn't need the Force to sense her mockery. Even after she left he struggled to restrain his indignation; anger alone might betray his presence to Maleth. His only choice was to remain where he was, docile beneath the threats of other Sith Lords.

For now, he told himself. Only for now.

The Hapans had prepared to defend their capital, and Imperials had prepared to take it. The Imperial aquatic transports pushed through the ocean depths, merely bothered by the concussive depth charges being dropped into the water by Miy'til fighters far above. When they got within three kilometers of the shore they were forced to break their maintained formation and avoid the hundreds of mines

that dangled from surface-level buoys to block their path. The transports had heavy cannons for underwater fire but more capable of precise de-mining were the starfighter-sized *Shark*-class submarine attack craft that weaved carefully around the dangling explosives, picking them off one-by-one with precise laser blasts so the transports could continue on. This process necessitated a slowdown and made the transport more vulnerable to depth charges, and by the time they closed on the coast three ships packed with seatroopers and stormtroopers had been hit and sunk.

The greatest obstacle to reaching the Chume'dan and the Fountain Palace was the massive stone cliffs that met the sea. Allana had no idea how to storm it, but she'd correctly assumed that the well-calibrated Imperial war machine would have a way around that obstacle. Once they'd cleared the minefield the surviving transports divided into teams, with the bulk of the attack force vectoring south, away from the cliffs, for the nearest beaches from which they could deploy stormtroopers and walkers to take the city.

Three transports, including Allana's, went straight for the cliffs on which the Fountain Palace perched. Two were packed full of soldiers and knights; the third exclusively contained a half-dozen boxy, compact airspeeders. The speeder carrier rose to the surface first and as soon as it breached the water, the armor plates on its back retracted and the speeders took to the air. As they engaged the Miy'tils flying overhead, the other two transports also surfaced and armed their anti-air laser canons. They weren't guaranteed to ward off the Miy'tils, especially if the Hapans decided to start lobbing torpedoes or concussion missiles, but Allana was hoping the pilots would hesitate to fire on targets so close to the Palace.

The right-side bulkhead of each transport swung out from bottom-braced hinges and created flat platforms over the water. Allana followed Tanith's platoon of exile commandos out onto the platform and gazed at the towering cliffs. The Jedi and Imperial Knights were right behind her.

"Do you see the entry point?" shouted Vitor. The salty air was thick with the sounds of shrill laserfire and waves crashing into cliffs.

"Give me a minute," Allana called, and took the macrobinoculars Tanith handed her.

Back in her day the Palace had kept several hidden hangar bays with mouths on these cliff-sides. Elliah confirmed that was still the case, but Allana wasn't used to seeing those hangars from the outside. The great metal doors that sealed them were carefully sculpted to blend in with the rock. Her search wasn't helped by dull light from the overcast sky, nor the platform's constant wave-top sway, nor the shrieking of Miy'tils and airspeeders dogfighting overhead.

Vitor brought out his own set of binoculars and searched. Just when Allana was getting frustrated he announced, "I see something. Look two hundred meters up, twenty degrees to your right."

Allana did her best to track it. "What is it?"

"I'm seeing a discolored section of rock. It's rectangular and regular and just the right size for a mid-sized hangar mouth."

Allana finally spotted it. "I think you're right. Let's get in close to deploy."

Vitor gave the order over his commlink, and the transport nudged closer to the cliff. Allana dared look up and spotted at least three Miy'tils and two Imperial speeders still dueling tight circles directly above them. At any second a slab of debris might drop and kill them all, or a laser-volley or a torpedo. The inside of the Fountain Palace would be an unfamiliar and deadly maze but she'd still feel less vulnerable.

When they were in position directly beneath the hangar, Vitor and Marin took the first step. They raised their grappled guns with two hands, aimed, and fired almost straight upward. Allana could feel them tug on the Force to direct their magnetic clamps to the faux-stone hangar portal. Two figures in scarlet armor- Imperial plasteel and Mandalorian *beskar*- were reeled upward on their fiberchord cables. Allana squinted and watched as they ignited their lightsabers and cut a portal big enough to fit both of them through.

"All right, they're in!" Roan reported. "Let's start moving people up!"

"Tell them to carve a wider hole," Tanith said.

By the time Roan relayed the order, Tanith's commandos had aimed their own hooks and let fly. Allana looked around anxiously as the first set of women were pulled through the now-widened portal by Marin and Vitor. There were almost a hundred people on this transport- Jedi, Imperial Knights, stormtroopers, Hapan volunteers- and she didn't know how long they could safely sit here. The second transports had pulled alongside their and its cargo of stormtroopers were beginning the same maneuver.

Tanith and a dazed-looking Elliah went up with the second batch of commandos and Allana was prepared to join the third, but Roan grabbed her arm and said, "Hold up. There's reports of a fight inside the hangar."

"How bad?"

"I'm not sure." Roan took his hand off his earpiece. "Hold here. Wait until Vitor gives the clear."

He barely got the words out when she caught the roar of a Miy'til doing a dive-bomb. She turned her head just in time to spot a volley of lasers fall like rain onto the back of the second surfaced transport. The shields held against the lasers but not the single proton torpedo the Miy'til dropped before pulling steeply away.

Someone threw Allana to the ground and covered her body right before the torp went off. She still felt a wash of heat and her ears popped from the pressure-change. When Nat Skywalker let go of her, she half-rose off the platform and looked back to see a great black pillar rising from the transport's sinking wreckage.

"We have to get up there now!" Allana shouted.

"Agreed," Roan grunted. "Your Majesty, with me!"

Roan and Nat took her on either shoulders and half-pulled her to the side of the platform. The three of them armed their grapples, aimed, fired, and used the Force to land their clamps true. Then she was rising fast, the gun rattling in her hands as it recoiled lines of fibercable. Wind flashed hair in her face and the cliff-face skirted inches from her nose and finally, suddenly, she stopped.

She used the Force to pull herself the rest of the way, over the lip of the hangar mouth. She rolled over the edge right after Roan, with Nat behind her, and when she scrambled to her feet she saw

the chaos of a hangar filled with smoke and laser-blasts and whipping lightsabers.

It was a hell of way to come home again.

"Majesty, stay *back*!" Roan barked and used the Force to knock her two steps away. As her shoulders tapped against a closed section of the hangar gate, Roan and Nat ignited their lightsabers and stepped into the fray with the brave determination of the young.

When they saw their queen had arrived safely, a few of Tanith's commandos dropped back to cover her. From what Allana could tell, Serissa's guards were already badly outnumbered and losing fast. More Imperial Knights and stormtroopers pulled themselves up from the transport and joined the fight. Allana counted as one, two, three black-armored Hapan guards dropped, mostly from blasterfire.

Just as the last one fell and the fight finally died, a great thundering boom sounded outside. Allana crouched by the cut-open portal and looked down, already knowing what she'd find. The transport they'd come on was sinking fast and casting a second black smoke-pillar into the sky.

"How many did we get off?" she looked at the nearest stormtrooper. She knew Tanith had gotten all her people off first, and she was glad, but the Imperials hadn't had time to offload all their people.

The stormtrooper offered his count after a minute. "Sixty-two total, Ma'am."

"You mean *everyone*?"

"That's right, total. Both transports."

There'd been over two hundred on those ships combined. They thought they'd need two hundred, at least, to properly storm the Fountain Palace. They hadn't even gotten a third of that, but Allana felt tentative hope as she looked around and counted the survivors: Tanith and her commandos, Marin and Nat, all the Imperial Knights.

And then, finally, she took stock of the ship sitting in the middle of the hangar. It was a broad flying wing with a smooth hull made of some nonreflective black metal. Tanith and Vitor were

already inspecting the strange craft, clearly impressed, and Allana barked, "Don't touch it!"

Tanith had been about to do just that. She lowered her gloved hand but remained beneath the wing. "Do you know this ship?"

"I've seen its kind before, maybe this exact one. It's Sith."

Marin stepped in beside Vitor. "I remember my parents talking about something like this, but that was a long time ago. Do you think it's the same one?"

"I don't know. I just know we're going to leave that thing alone until we take care of its owners."

"The guards were here when we cut in, like they were watching the ship," said Vitor. "Odds are they alerted people we're here."

"Are you sure there's no one inside?" Tanith glanced at the black wing warily.

"I don't sense anyone," said Allana, "But we can't leave it unattended. Tanith, set at least four people to guard it."

Tanith didn't like the idea of leaving four commandos when they were already undermanned; neither did Allana. The younger woman nodded anyway. Allana added, "Have them set demolitions charges at structural weak points. We should be ready to collapse the hangar if we have to."

Tanith didn't like that either, but again she nodded. Four Hapan commandos, no matter how trained, probably wouldn't stop a determined Sith Lord. Destroying the hangar, and the ship with it, would be a last resort to prevent a Sith escape.

As Tanith gathered her team and gave orders, more people gathered around Allana: Vitor and Marin, Nat, Elliah, Roan, Treis Sinde and Mohrgan Valtor. Vitor asked her, "Do you remember your way inside the Palace from here?"

"That depends where we need to go."

"I'm feeling a Force presence, a bad one," said Nat. "It's... some ways away."

Allana closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. She did feel something, as he'd said: a dark mind in furious concentration, though it didn't seem to be paying attention to her. Maybe it was Serissa, maybe someone else; either way, it needed to be taken out.

"I'll try to guide us the best I can to the source," Allana said. "But I'll need help. Elliah, can you get us that?"

All eyes shifted to the girl. She was no commandos and no Jedi. The fight she'd just been through and narrowly survived had left her visibly overwhelmed. Nonetheless, she met Allana's eyes and focus came. "Yes, Your Majesty. I can do it."

Allana heard the doubt behind feigned assurance. She favored Elliah with a smile and said, "No. We'll do it together."

Passage through the Fountain Palace was a recreation of childhood memory and a desecration. As they pushed through the elegant marble hallways and worked their way up spiraling stairs, everything Elliah had barely remembered for seven years was resurrected in detail vivid and horrifying. Queen Serissa's guards arrived in batches, using laserfire and even grenades to try and stop their advance. Whenever a battle sparked the elegant hallways would become choked with smoke and ash and the sickening smell of blaster-scorched flesh. Stormtroopers, commandos, and lightsaber-wielding knights would work in cooperation, gunning and cutting down enemy after enemy while taking losses of their own. With an hour even two Imperial Knights were felled, though thankfully not Roan or his friends. The stormtroopers and commandos took worse losses. Bodies that fell, friend and foe alike, were left to clog the halls. There was no time to mourn.

The Jedi used the Force to sense approaching squadrons. Elliah used her memory of the Palace, which grew more detailed by the minute, to help them evade fights in possible. Once she recalled a passage behind the bedroom mirror of an empty guest suite. Another time she led them to the base of a staircase hidden behind a wall just as Serissa's guards started firing. Childhood hide-and-seek games with Hogrum had become horribly serious. When there was no choice but to fight, every effort was made to shield the guide and the queen. Elliah was grateful for protection and ashamed of her own fear. Allana Djo rankled. Queen though she was, old thought she was, she clearly itched to draw her lightsaber and join the Jedi and Knights- her family- in the fray. She was very different

from scheming Queen Demia that Elliah had grown up under, to say nothing of Serissa.

The smoke was still clearing from their fifth all-out engagement and the stormtroopers were counting their dead when Vitor Fel announced, "We're very close. I can feel it."

"I do too," said the long-haired teenage Jedi, Nat. "I think there's more than one."

"Elliah, do you know where we are now?" asked Roan. Sweat-smeared ash stuck to his face and the burn of a near-miss laserblast streaked over his right cheekbone.

Her own dirty face twisted in a frown. "We've moved out of the area I was allowed to go in. I think we're in some secure zone."

"I know where we are," Allana announced as she came up behind them with her commando chief, Tanith. "We're almost at the Command-and-Control center. You can bet those Sith are there."

"Serissa too?" asked Marin. She stood right behind Vitor, and Elliah thought she saw the older Fel prince shudder slightly at the name.

Allana shook her head. "I don't know her Force aura. I've *never* even met her."

"Then we'll just have to find out," Roan said firmly. "How do we get there?"

Allana scanned the three-way intersection they'd encountered the guards at. "I think that way *or* that way will work. We need to time it so we take both entrances at once."

"If you know the Sith are in there, won't they know *you're* coming?" asked Elliah.

"You can bet they will," said Roan. "The reason they aren't attacking right now is probably because they're waiting. And I've been getting this... feeling, when we face the enemy."

"They're fearless," Allana agreed. "Way beyond normal soldiers."

"Serissa's elite are fanatics," Elliah reminded.

"It's more than that," Vitor agreed. "Some form of mind control? A battle meld?"



"There's only one way to find out." Roan gripped his lightsaber hard.

"All right," Allana breathed out and looked over the assembled troops. "Vitor, take your stormtroopers and Knights. Take the left branch. I'll go with Tanith and her team. Elliah, stay with us, please."

"I'll go with Vitor's team," Marin said.

That took Allana by surprise; Nat too. The teenager said, "We need more Force-users with the Hapans."

"Go with Marin," said Roan. "Treis, Mohrgan, with me. We'll protect Elliah and the queen."

It was a counter-intuitive swap, but no one objected. With that decided they moved quickly. As the Hapan commandos pressed forward down the right branch Roan sidled next to Elliah and said, "Stay out of the command room until it's clear. Unless someone comes at you from behind."

"I know. I'll be careful."

He looked like he wants to say more, but instead he nodded and skirted along the hallway's edge to the front of the line, joining his red-armored friends. Allana was in the middle of the commando line, protected but clearly ready and willing to get into the fight if possible. Elliah was stunned by the fearlessness of these Jedi and Imperial Knights. It went beyond soldiers' valor and it wasn't fanaticism either. This Force power they'd learned to wield had imbued them not just with special powers but a special character, as though this so-called Light Side they pledged themselves to seeped some of its light into them. There was something almost sublime that made them terrifying to watch. Elliah could understand how the venal Hapan nobles of old had cowered from their glow and spitefully recast them as monsters.

They reached the end of the hallway. They crowded at the blast door and the Hapan commandos set charges, but there were no comm signals or countdowns marking the time to fire. The Knights handled that as well. Elliah could feel, just faintly, the stirring of a mind that must have been Roan's. He was reaching out to his brother at the other entrance, a stronger and deeper connection

that Elliah had with Hogrum, and when their minds found communion Roan barked, "Now!"

The charge went off. Elliah's ears popped from the pressure and smoke filled the hall. Blasters tanged and lightsabers buzzed to life and the battle was on.

When Vitor plunged into the command center, Marin was right behind him. Nat came next and then the stormtroopers. The chamber was a three-tiered bowl with a big tactical holo representing the orbital fight blazing in the center, but Marin's eyes were immediately drawn to the man sitting cross-legged beneath the holo. Electric glow cast across a pale face lined by vertical black tattoos. Long hair, straight and white, fell to the shoulders of his black robe. His eyes were closed, like he hadn't noticed them at all, but Marin knew he was the source of the power they'd chased.

Around him, like sentinels, stood four more black-robed figures. Lightsabers sprung to life in their hands, *single*-bladed sabers, not like the double-blade Vitor said Serissa would wield. Maybe the queen wasn't here; maybe she wasn't in the Palace at all.

Just in time Marin noticed the twenty-odd black-armored Hapan guards lined up on different tiers, half facing Marin and Vitor, the others facing the second entrance just blown through. Laserfire came at them like a torrent. Three lightsabers spun and danced to deflect the attacks but there were too many blasts and three knights couldn't provide enough cover for the stormtroopers. Marin caught one stormie drop in the corner of her eye; she felt another die. A third one, right behind Vitor, wound his hand back and hurled a grenade all the way across the chamber. It exploded on impact with the uppermost tier, shaking the room and filling it with smoke.

There was a tiny pause in the enemy's fire. Marin knew what to do; Ninet's *beskar* would protect her like no one else's armor could. She jumped onto the railing at the edge of her tier and jumped again, using the Force to propel her all the way to the smoky crater on the far side. She kept her lightsaber up to protect her face and stray lasers panged against her red plates. One shot scorched

through unprotected fabric on her right flank but didn't burn through skin. She forgot any pain as soon as she landed in the wreckage. She danced among the Hapan guards, weaving her lightsaber through rifle-barrels and limbs, dropping one woman after another. They were regrouping fast and she could sense that Sith Lord in the middle urging them to throw themselves at her.

She felt the heat of a laser blast nearly miss her head. She cut through the wrist of the guard in front of her, spun around to take her next attacker, and barely blocked the next shot before it took her in the face. Then another red-armored figure fell through the air and pounded boots-first into Marin's attacker. Vitor bounded off her and cut down another enemy before backing away. More guards were coming at them from both sides, forcing them to close formation as they batted back blasterfire.

"Dammit, I'm trying to keep you alive!" Marin snarled as her shoulders knocked against his.

"I'm not going to die here," he said, so damned certain.

A hail of well-placed laserfire from across the chamber cut down some of their attackers. Marin looked and saw that the stormtroopers were now spread out on all three tiers, as were the Hapan commandos. The four Sith with lightsabers were also springing to action, and she spotted one cutting his way through several stormtroopers on his way to Nat.

Marin wasn't going to let Vitor die and she damned well wasn't letting Nat die either. She summoned the Force to knock the guards in front of her off their feet, then sent Vitor a simple command: *jump*.

They jumped as one, all the way across the chamber. The stormtroopers immediately let loose with everything they had, cutting down more guards who'd been distracted by the two knights. Marin and Vitor landed on the second tier, blocking the Sith who was trying to get up to Nat. It was a bald-headed human, face turned savage by red and black tattoos. When Marin saw his gold eyes she realized with a start this was the first Sith she'd ever faced.

Not so Vitor. He attacked from the right with a series of fast feints that forced the Sith to leave his other flank open. Marin swung but the Sith was nimble. He backflipped over the railing, down to the lower tier.

*You first*, Vitor sent Marin, and she jumped with her saber held high overhead. She left herself open and the Sith attacked on instinct. When his lightsaber hit her *beskar*-plated torso it felt like someone had smacked her across the chest with a pike, but that was all. The Sith lost a half-second in surprise and that was what killed him. Vitor was already down on his other side and he thrust his blade deep into the Sith's side. The gold light in his eyes seemed to go out as he collapsed.

*Good work*, she sent Vitor as they looked around the chamber. The big tactical holo had been knocked out, making the whole place darker. The stormtroopers and commandos seemed to have gotten the upper hand on Serissa's guards as the groups exchanged fire across the upper two tiers of the bowl. As for the lower level, it was a flurry of blazing lightsabers. Marin spotted one red blade battling two white ones on the far side. Nat was jumping off the second tier to help Vitor's brother, who was locking sabers with another Sith.

Still sitting on the platform in the middle of the chamber, not even budged, was that white-haired Sith Lord. The moment Marin looked at him she felt his mind touch hers. She felt abject, absolute dread at the very sight of him, and the overpowering need to run and get as far away as possible if she wanted to keep her life.

His mind trick failed the moment she saw Vitor charge ahead. One bound took him onto the platform and he lifted his saber high for a fast killing blow. The Sith's right hand flashed up out of nowhere and Vitor charged into a burst of Force-lighting. The blast knocked him off the platform entirely and Marin bounded toward him, only for another Sith to jump in front of her. She barely caught his red lightsaber with her own. This one was a Gran, not tattooed but still ugly, with all three eyes maliciously gold.

This one was smarter than the last one. He knew she had *beskar* on and was making precise jabs at the points where armor didn't protect her. He went for her sides beneath the ribs, her wrists, the

backs of her legs. He was so quick it was hard to defend and Marin almost forget she had one last surprise for him. She batted his blade from her ribs, her waist, then counterattacked with a thrust that left her extended too far forward. The Sith saw his opening and swung down for her wrists. She tipped her body forward just a little more, and instead of shearing off her hands, his blade crashed into the cortosis buckler strapped over her forearm. The Sith's red blade crackled, then shrunk to nothing in his hands.

His fine-toothed jaw dropped in shock. Marin didn't hesitate. Without waiting to fix her balance she swung and took the Sith right below the shoulders, all the way through. He collapsed in two pieces to the ground.

She'd killed a Sith. She hadn't killed him with rage or darkness like she had to Kaynar Auchs. She'd done it survive; to complete this mission; to liberate Hapes; to protect Vitor. It was a good kill, a clean kill. She told herself that and hoped it was true.

She heard the crackle of another burst of Force lightning just before it reached her. She barely got her lightsaber up and searing, painful energy tore across her face and chest and hands. Not even *beskar* could block it. The white-haired Sith was on his feet now, arms spread wide like a cross. Lightning flashed out of both hands and seemed to spread in all directions. Marin saw Nat and Roan struggle to deflect it. Vitor was catching some on his lightsaber but the sheer power of it was forcing him to his knees. At the same time she felt the entire chamber rattle and heard it groan, like metal was being ripped apart. It *was* being torn; this Sith was about to shred every console, every wall, every piece of equipment in this chamber. His power was immense; Marin tried to shoulder the pain and stagger toward him but an invisible hand was pushing her back, just like it was pushing back all the other Jedi and shoving aside the rifles of all the commandos and soldiers trying to train a gun on him.

His raw, dark power had rendered the entire room helpless. She'd never met a Jedi with this strength and never imagined she'd face such a Sith. And she could feel his mind again, filling hers with

absolute dread, the kind that turned to ice in her stomach and made her already-buckling legs go.

And then, almost softly, something small and round arced through the air and fell into the nexus of this Dark Side storm. It hit the platform in front of the Sith Lord and bounced.

He saw it. He picked it up with his mind, not slacking his attack on the others. It rose fast in front of him, but Marin used the tiny necessary strength to find the deadman trigger on the thermal detonator, tap it, and release.

A globe of blinding light flared in the middle of the chamber. It was gone in an instant, and when the red-white blur faded from Marin's eyes she saw the Sith was gone too. *All* the Sith were gone; she counted four black-robed bodies on the lowest tier. Of the last one there was no trace at all.

She noticed the Hapan guards were no longer firing. She looked at the upper tiers and saw stormtroopers and Tanith's commandos spread out across the bowl, mostly checking bodies but also forcing prisoners to their knees.

Relief bloomed inside her. She could feel it spread like a cool breeze across all the Jedi, even Allana and Elliah as they emerged from the blown-open doorway on the third tier.

"We're clear, Your Majesty," a panting Tanith said.

"Who lobbed that detonator?" Marin called.

"I did," said Tanith. "Did you trigger it?"

"That's right." She smiled a very tired smile. "Nice teamwork."

"I knew one of you would take care of it."

"This is the C-and-C," Allana reminded them. "Is any of this equipment salvageable?"

"We'll figure out right away," said Tanith, suddenly serious.

As the stormtroopers and commandos began searching the chamber, the Jedi and Imperial Knights gathered in the center. Marin was relieved to find that no one had taken serious injuries, but her mirth disappeared when she looked at Vitor. He was still glowing, but just seeing him was too much the reminder that this wasn't over yet.

"This was good, but what about Serissa?" asked Roan. "She's still out there? Can anyone sense her?"

Allana closed her eyes. So did Vitor. They searched for the same woman, thinking they'd find her for different reasons. It was Allana who said, eyes still closed, "I sense at least one more Sith. I think it's... moving away."

"I feel it too," Vitor muttered, barely audible. "It's... angry... but frightened."

"We can't stop here," Roan said. "We need to chase her."

"No." Vitor's eyes popped open. When he put his hands on his brother's shoulders Marin felt a chill run through her. "We need someone to man the C-and-C. They might still try to retake it."

"Someone needs to stop Serissa."

"We'll stop her," Allana said firmly.

Tanith appeared behind her. "Your Majesty, I must insist—"

"You can come with me. But I'm going after Serissa."

"So am I," Vitor said. Marin's mouth opened to protest but she froze. She didn't know what to say and nothing would swerve him if she did.

Roan wasn't happy either, but Vitor said firmly, "Get this place fixed up. Find a way to work the transmitter. Call *Father*. Tell him what we've done. We might even be able to command the Hapans to surrender. Stay here. Save lives. Let me take care of Serissa."

Marin could tell he was using all his older-brother authority to compel Roan. The younger prince nodded reluctantly. "All right. I'll stay here. But take Treis and Mohrgan with you."

"Do you need a guide?" asked Elliah. The young woman had been hanging on the edge of the circle, uncertain where she belonged.

"I think you've done enough," Allana said gently. "Thank you. I can find them from here."

Elliah started to object, but relented. Like Roan, like Marin herself, she knew her protests would only cost important time.

"Your Majesty, *I'm* going with you," Marin said. "Nat, stay with Roan and Elliah. See if you can get news from Shedu Maad."

"I'll try."

Marin patted him on the back but her eyes were on Vitor. He risked a tiny glance at her but looked away fast, almost ashamed. He faced his brother again and she could tell he struggled for something to say. He'd claimed he'd taken every step to prepare for his death but he stumbled on these last, fleeting moments. Anyone would.

"Get in touch with Father," he said. "Do what you can to end this and so will I."

Roan nodded. "May the Force be with you."

Vitor couldn't find words for that. When his brother's face scrunched in concern Marin said, "It'll be with you too, Roan. Right?"

Vitor swallowed and squeezed his brother's shoulders one last time. "You're already a magnificent Knight. I'm sure you'll grow even greater."

Roan looked away in a rare show of embarrassment. Allana cleared her throat. Maybe she'd gotten a hint of what had just happened, maybe not. She said, soft but firm, "Serissa's getting away. We have to go now."

She was right. They climbed up two tiers to the blown-open door and followed Allana out. Marin stayed right behind Vitor, and she noted that, once he stepped away from Roan, he did not risk another look at his brother before leaving the chamber.

The turbolaser batteries spread across an eight-kilometer stretch of *Invincible's* starboard hull lanced out and converged on a single point. To Davek it looked like a triangle of emerald destruction, and at the apex was the double-disc of a Battle Dragon whose shields shuddered and died before his eyes. With its shields gone it tried to pull back, but one of Davek's smaller star destroyers had taken its opposite flank and pinned it too close to *Invincible's* arc of fire. Like a balloon popping under pressure, the Hapan warship seemed for a second to collapse, then explode outward in a burst of flame and debris.

Davek wasn't a man who rejoiced in thousands of lost lives, but it was a sign of the battle's exhausting grind that the fireball gave



him a surge of confident energy. With *Invincible* he still had overwhelming firepower, and the Hapans were doing their best to avoid a direct confrontation with his super star destroyer. Instead their Nova cruisers, Miy'tils, and now Battle Dragons were engaging in careful dances with Davek's other star destroyers, striking and doing damage but retreating before *Invincible* could bring its guns to bear. The fight had drawn on for hours with so sign of a tipping point. He was starting to doubt whether Serissa's ships would surrender even if she were captured or killed. By the end *Invincible* might be the only ship left at all.

Davek turned his attention back to the tactical holo and began evaluating where *Invincible* might be able to trap another Battle Dragon. Just as he was starting to get ideas Briggs announced, "Your Majesty, we've got a signal from the ground!"

Davek hurried over to the comm station. "What's the source? One of our transports?"

"Actually, sir, it seems to be coming from the Fountain Palace itself. It probably has the only transmitter that could punch through all the jamming and distortion."

"Open the link. Let me speak to them."

The comm lieutenant flicked a switch and said, "This is *Invincible*."

"Is the Emperor present?" The voice was marred by static but clearly his younger son's.

Davek hunched over the console. "I'm here, Roan. Do I understand you're broadcasting from the Fountain Palace?"

"That's correct. We've secured the command and communications center."

"What about the queen?"

"Not yet. Allana and Vitor are pursuing her now. I stayed behind to keep the C-and-C secure." He didn't sound triumphant like he deserved to.

"You're doing fine work, Roan, thank you. Do the Hapans know that you've taken the Palace? Can you try broadcasting a surrender signal?"

"We're about to try, but I don't think the fleet will accept anything without Serissa's authorization."

"You're probably right, but please try."

"We will. Father, if you knock out the Hapan flagship it might have a better effect. It's called *Black Majesty*."

"I'm sorry, we've been unable to identify their command vessel."

"This C-and-C tracks and identifies every Hapan ship up there. We can send the data up to you."

"Excellent. Do it."

"I can send it as soon as I finish this message."

"Good." Time to sign off. "You did fine work, Roan. Thank you."

After a tiny pause, Roan said, "Thank *you*, Father. C-and-C out."

The link closed. Davek stepped back from the console. The lieutenant reported, "We're receiving a data package now."

"Can you route it to the tactical station?"

"Of course."

Davek and Briggs hurried across the deck to Tactical. "Lieutenant," Briggs said, "Are you receiving data from the comm station?"

"Yes, sir, it just came in."

"It should contain trackers and identifiers for every Hapan ship. Can you pinpoint the Battle Dragon called *Black Majesty* and mark it on the display?"

"One moment." The lieutenant's brows drew together. With a few taps to her console, a red circle appeared around one Battle Dragon currently hanging outside the edge of the combat zone but relatively close to *Nightwatch*.

Davek crossed his arms over his chest. "Get us a line to Captain Korak's ship. Let's see if we can't box in that Dragon."

"Right away, Your Majesty."

It was such a small bit of information, but combined with the taking of the Fountain Palace it just might be enough to end this battle. He had his sons to thank for that, and he was glad but not surprised. They'd never once let him down. When this was all over he'd make sure they knew how grateful he was, and how proud.

When he saw the broad, open portal to the command deck at the far end of the corridor, Korosh Vull nearly stumbled. No one except the seven Oathkeepers behind him noticed and he recovered quickly. He approached with long straight steps, back stiff, hands to the sides, close to the sidearm holstered at his hip but not touching it. With every step that portal grew closer and closer. Once he went through, he would never come out.

His heart was beating fast. His palms were sweating. It took effort to breathe at a steady pace. This was what his life had been building toward. He'd never expected it until it was upon him, but he could see it now. Destiny, he discovered, was only found in retrospect.

It all went back to *Voidwalker*, for him and Davek Fel. His squad had been lucky to find a place there after *Shieldbreaker* was destroyed. When the attrition was over he'd been the only *Breaker* pilot alive. That had felt like luck too, and a curse. Heroism and, perhaps, guilt had impelled him upward. When the next crisis came he'd picked a side and did his duty to Veers. For a small twist it could have been different. For a tiny one he could have died with *Shieldbreaker* a quarter-century ago.

Yes. Fate was only seen in retrospect.

At least he wasn't dying in a fireball or freezing in the void. This death was an achievement. This death was a choice. Vull couldn't do much better.

He kept on walking, straight and stiff and smooth, until he was nearly at the portal. Only then did a pair of stormtroopers step in from either side to block his passage.

"Do you have business on the bridge?" one asked. Less confrontational, more curious. That could change fast. Even the fraternity of shipmates in battle didn't last forever.

"Yes, I need to deliver a message right away."

"A message for who?" asked the other trooper. He seemed to be examining the men behind Vull. Having a party of officers and stormies made you look authoritative and warned off questions when you were walking down the hall, but in front of guards it raises suspicions.

"These are my escorts. I have an *urgent* message," Vull insisted. He scanned past their white domes and spotted Davek Fel. He was eleven or twelve meters away, examining the tactical holo. He didn't have the regal silk robes he liked to parade in, but he was recognizable for the gold embroidery on his admiral's uniform and the streak of white through his hair. He had his back to Vull but he was facing another man in conversation. Vull caught his rank bars and added, "The general needs to see this very badly."

The troopers exchanged uncertain looks. One said, "Stay here. I'll go get the general."

As he turned to go Vull said, "There's really no time for this. Please, let me."

He slipped in between the troopers and trotted ahead. One called out for him, but he didn't look back. He crossed ten meters in a long, short instant. By the time he got to Fel and the general both men had turned in surprise.

Vull heard the trooper coming up behind him. He skidded to a halt two meters from Fel, put his hands in his sides, and snapped a formal bow.

"It's an honor to meet you, your Majesty. I have a message."

The trooper's footsteps slowed.

Vull raised up from his bow. Hands at his sides. Heart beating fast. He locked eyes with Emperor Fel and saw a vague recognition, then uncertainty.

One little ship, so many destinies. Two to end here.

His right hand came up and pulled the sidearm with it. He snapped his wrist and shot from the hip. Two red blasts into Fel's stomach. He twitched his wrist. A third blast, to the chest. Then the stormtrooper behind him, too late, hefted his rifle and pumped a barrage into his back. Vull toppled forward. Fel slouched to one side, then crumpled. The general at his side caught and lowered him.

No one reached out for Vull. He knew when he hit the deck but didn't feel anything. He was aware of a blurred, faint light that seemed high above and well past reach. The light faded quickly and left nothing behind.

\* \* \*

Davek wasn't in pain. He was surprised by that. When the first two shots had hit him a flash of agony had washed across his body, but he'd not even felt the third one take him. He didn't feel the deck slip out beneath his powerless legs and he didn't feel Briggs catch him and lower him to the deck. He saw Briggs' mouth moving and saw the laser blasts that took down his attacker, but he heard nothing either. There was only a white noise drowning out everything.

That face, those eyes. For a second he'd almost remembered them. Now he couldn't. He didn't know why. There were a thousand reasons. So many people died, even in a just war. Sometimes the survivors were unlucky ones. A thousand reasons. It didn't matter which.

There was some feeling left; little needles in the hands and feet. His head rolled to one side and he saw his fingers. He tried to move them and failed. The tingling went away. Everything went away, even light.

Blurred vision saw dimmed slowly to black. People shifted around him, a gathered crowd. He knew no faces. No Marasiah. No Roan, no Vitor. No Arlen. Not his father, not his mother. His mother was alive in the Force, so they said. Marasiah and Roan and Vitor and Arlen too, he hoped, but not his father. Not him. That was why he'd try so hard to do what he could with what he had. He'd never expected to endure.

That was the way of it. Everything went away. Year on year, century on century. Every ambition, every value, every dream. Honors and duties. Victories and defeats. Empires and emperors.

Everything went away.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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Clearing out the last of the missile towers around the Sith Temple wasn't the relief it should have been. Before knocking out the final installation Marasiah had already been alerted to the Hapan Battle Dragon that had appeared in orbit directly above them. It must have been stationed on the far side of the planet, invisible from their approach vector, then swung around to attack position.

It wasn't attacking yet. As Marasiah pulled her fighter higher in the atmosphere to get a better sensor reading, she found that it had deployed three squadrons of Miy'tils but those too were holding position. They were waiting for something.

The surviving Jedi ships, five in all, had set down at the base of the three-pyramid Sith Temple. Even from high above Marasiah could spot a chaos of many-colored blades. A part of her wanted to set down her TIE Saber and joined the fight but she couldn't just ignore the Battle Dragon.

"Orders, Knight One?" Katrin asked as their fighters lifted higher in the sky, toward the unseen and distant warship.

"Stay with me, Knight Two. Everyone else, keep low altitude and give the Jedi cover fire if they need it. I'm going to try and contact the fleet."

Her pilots did as ordered and she increased altitude. As the twin Sabers cut through the thinning air, she steered well-clear of the Battle Dragon and its Miy'tils. She watched her sensors more than the sky but the Hapan fighters didn't seem to be budging.

She leveled off on the edge of the atmospheric envelope, Shedu Maad a green and blue-stone sprawl beneath her and the planet's silver icy veils above. She patched the *Thrawn* into her long-range transmitter and tried to make contact with Admiral Jaeger, but she knew Hapan jamming, plus distortion from the surrounding Mists, might get in the way. Nothing from Jaeger. Nothing within the limited range of her fighter's sensors either.

She set her comm to broadcast to all Imperial frequencies and called, "This is Knight One hailing Imperial vessels. This is Knight One. Any ships in range, please respond."

Two long seconds passed before she got a reply. It was marred by heavy static but she could make out the man's words. "We read you, Knight One. This is the star destroyer *Por Dun*. Repeat, the *Por Dun*. Do you copy?"

She knew the name, but not the ship. A Kel Dor, one of Davek's trusted tactical ensigns aboard *Voidwalker*. Died in the same battle that had killed Jagged Fel, slandered as an alien traitor by Corrien Veers, then firmly rehabilitated by Davek's propaganda team after becoming Emperor. One thing she loved about her husband was that he never forgot his friends.

"I hear you, *Por Dun*. Holding over the planet now. Sitrep?"

"*Thrawn* is holding on the other side the passage. We were sent to assist. Pushing through now."

"Do you see that Battle Dragon?"

"That's why we were sent to assist."

"It's holding now. Its fighters too. I don't know how long it'll last."

"We're progressing slowly through the passage. Still some mines left. Estimate arrival in seventeen minutes."

"Understood. We'll hail if anything changes."

Marasiah shut off her link. She slowed her TIE Saber and pivoted so as to face the Battle Dragon. It was just a tiny speck

above the corona-glow of Shedú Maad's atmosphere, but if wanted to it could pulverize the shieldless Sith Temple with a few orbital volleys. Marasiah hailed her Knights close to the surface and they confirmed that the Jedi had moved their fight into the pyramids. She called on them to pull away and form up with her. She wasn't ready to charge that Battle Dragon yet, but it might start firing at any moment, and Marasiah's handful of Imperial Knights would be all that stood between the Jedi and oblivion.

It was going to be an excruciating seventeen minutes.

Darth Terrid returned to his home of twenty-five years in the center of a maelstrom. The One Sith had been waiting outside the pyramids to stop the Jedi landing parties but a few well-placed strafing runs by the Imperial Knights but cut many down. The Jedi had rushed out of their ships in a surge of green, blue, violet, and gold, and the Sith's red tide didn't last long before retreating into the Temple.

Terrid had told the Jedi everything they needed to know about the additions the Sith had made to the original complex. After running out of *Jade Shadow's* hold, Ayen Qemar and Ceynar Valilss had joined K'Kruhk and a mob of a dozen Jedi in storming the southern pyramid, where the One Sith kept the children it indoctrinated. Terrid followed Jade through the frenzy to a pair of tall, unmistakable Wookiee knights.

As one of the few present who remembered Shedú Maad from its Jedi days, Lowbacca led the charge into the main pyramid. Arlen was already with them, and Terrid and Jade joined them in the attack. On Jade's insistence, the Jedi had given him a lightsaber. He'd been shocked to see that it was *his* lightsaber, the one he'd crafted from black stone and surrendered on Orelon. They'd even left its red focusing crystal intact. If that was a message, he wasn't sure what it was, but it didn't matter, not so long as he could fight.

A great battle immediately joined in the lowest level's broad foyer space. Dozens of Jedi battled dozens of Sith but Terrid stayed on the outer edge of the chamber.



"The lift to Krayt's chamber is on the far side," he shouted above the constant crash of lightsabers. "There are passages that go around! Follow me!"

He caught the hesitation that passed between the Jedi- Arlen, Jade, Lowbacca, the Grand Master's son Karrash and a younger Mirialian whom Terrid didn't know.

Jade was the one who said, "Let's go. Krayt's our priority."

Lowbacca made his decision: a quick nod. Terrid turned from the chamber and began directing the Jedi around a series of narrow hallways that bordered the foyer. Like the rest of this Sith Temple, the walls were made of rough blue-stone bricks mined, carved, and piled in place by the Jedi and their Hapan allies decades ago. He hoped he they appreciated the ironies involved. Not so long ago Jedi and Hapans had fought against Sith; today Sith and Hapans fought against Jedi. If the Jedi thought vermin could be anything more than temporary tools they were willfully blinding themselves to history.

Terrid wasn't blind and he didn't hesitate to do what had to be done. They hurried down the first two corridors and found them empty but on turning the corner into the third Terrid nearly walked into a Sith.

The lights were dim but he could make out a human face with lined of black tattoos over its natural tan skin. Darth Sidon, one of the younger Lords. Sidon registered Terrid's face and his jaw dropped in disbelief.

Terrid thumbed on his lightsaber. Sidon's was already lit but he barely brought it up in time to block. Terrid kept attacking, red blade against red blade, pushing Sidon back three steps. Then Terrid summoned an easy surge of anger and unleashed a blast of Force lightning from his palm. It curled around Sidon's lightsaber and crackled across his face. Pain was enough to distract him. One swift horizontal strike across the waist and he cut Sidon in two.

Panting, he looked back at the Jedi. He could see soft condemnation on Jade's face and Arlen's too. For some reason that drained away the glow of victory he'd expected to feel.

"Don't thank me, Jedi," Terrid snarled. "Come on!"

Killing Sidon might not have given satisfaction, but Wyyrlok would be different. Wyyrlok had overseen his brutal molding as a youth and eventual breaking. Wyyrlok would surely end up standing between them and Darth Krayt.

Once they got to the opposite side of the embattled foyer, Terrid pushed them further. He and Arlen worked together to cut through one armored door, then another, until finally they carved their way to a round low-ceilinged vestibule chamber. On the opposite side of their entrance: the smooth grey metal doors to the lift that plunged down to Darth Krayt's subterranean resting place. In the chamber's center, a pair of Sith. Darth Venar, brown-faced Klatooinan who'd lost his right eye in a sparring match with Inexor a decade back. Darth Marok, a Wookiee all the more terrifying for his shaved-off fur and tattooed red-and-black skin.

Venar's one eye widened in shock as he saw Terrid before him. The Chiss charged. Venar brought up his lightsaber and blocked Terrid's first attack as Jade and the Mirialan hurried to help. Terrid was aware that Arlen and the two Jedi Wookiees rushed the bellowing Marok, but all his concentration was on Venar. The Klatooinan's saber moved fast to block Jade's attack, then Terrid's, while the Mirialan hovered back from them both, waiting for his opening.

Darth Venar didn't give him a chance. The Klatooinan ducked low and swept his saber out in a broad arc, forcing Terrid and Jade both to jump up. At the same time he unleashed a wave of Force energy that threw them further. Terrid's back slammed into the wall. His head cracked hard brick. As he dropped to the floor his lightsaber spilled from his hand. He watched as Venar parried two attacks from the Mirialan, then slipped a jab past the Jedi's defenses and poked the tip of his red blade through the Mirilian's shoulder.

Jade was already on her feet but Venar pushed her back with another Force-punch. Then he was back on Terrid. He grabbed the Chiss by the hair and dragged him up by the head, pinning him against the rough stone wall.

"I knew you were a traitor but I never thought you'd bring the Jedi *here!*" Venar snarled.

He cocked his arm back and aimed the tip of his saber at Terrid's chest. Then he shoved it forward. Right before the blade could burn through, a violet one swept in from below and knocked it upward. Venar reacted quickly to Jade's attack. He released Terrid's hair and jumped two steps back, but the Mirialan had recovered and was right behind him. His green blade tore out from Venar's sternum. The Sith's one eye bulged, his jaw hung slack, and when the Jedi released him, he collapsed dead on the ground.

"Thank you, Yeris!" Jade called over the continuing clash of the three Wookiees, then looked at Terrid. "You okay?"

"Yes," he said, glancing at his shirt. A burnt tear in the fabric, but not in the flesh. Her timing had been perfect. "Thank you," he added.

"Someone's got to make sure we find the right secret catacomb."

There was only one of those and they both knew it. Jade's generosity hadn't surprised him, but it still felt strange, after all these years, to be among Force-users who fought and sometimes died for each other's sake.

These damned foolish, noble Jedi.

They turned their attention to the clashing Wookiees on the other side of the chamber. Even Arlen was wisely skirting clear of that confrontation. Instead he was calling the lift up from Krayt's far-below chamber. Darth Marok attacked with primal ferocity, battling both Lowbacca and Karrash at once. At the same time he reached out with claw-tipped hands and snapped his sharp teeth, once even getting a piece of Karrash's arm. The brave Mirialan who'd felled Venar waited for his chance, then took it when Marok's hairless back was to him. Yeris tried to run him through from behind as he had the Klatooinan, but Marok pivoted and pushed aside his attack at the last moment. That gave Karrash an opening, and the Wookie Jedi scored a horizontal slash across Marok's right bicep.

The Sith howled as one arm dropped to the floor, but he kept his lefthand claws tight on his lightsaber and even managed to push back an attack from Lowbacca. Karrash didn't relent; he shoved his furred body against Marok's hairless flank and drove his saber up,

into the huge Sith's stomach, then pushed the scorching blade through Marok's ribcage and lungs. The Wookiee's dying howl was one of the most terrifying things Terrid had ever heard, all the more for its sudden stop. Marok's body dropped to the stone with a heavy *thud*.

Six Jedi and one former Sith stood over the dead, panting from exhaustion, scouring their bodies for wounds. Arlen announced, "The lift's almost here."

Then the door opened, and it began again. This time just one Sith charged out of the lift capsule: a Barabel with ferocious black and red patterns on his scales, black armor over his body, a thick tail like a whip, and half-meter red energy blades jutting out from above either wrist.

Terrid knew him well. So did Jade, Lowbacca, and Arlen.

Yeris was stuck dead ahead of him and tried to stand his ground, but Kheykid emerged from the lift tube like a whirling. The Barabel threw himself into a spin that batted the green lightsaber aside, cracked his tail through the Mirialan's kneecaps, then ended with a high decapitating blow.

Just as Yeris' head hit the ground a grenade went off inside the lift tube. It wasn't enough to hurt anyone in the vestibule chamber but it succeeded in turning the mobile capsule into an unusable chunk of charred black metal.

Kheykid was already attacking again, dropped to all fours and rushing straight at Lowbacca. The Grand Master jumped out of his path then came down on top of him, clawed feet clattering on Kheykid's armored back. For a moment it looked like he'd pinned Kheykid there and Karrash rushed in to strike a killing blow. Then the Barabel pushed up hard with all four limbs, throwing Lowbacca off him. Still low to the ground, Kheykid dashed past Karrash. One of his short-blades cut through the Wookiee's left calf. As he fell Karrash made a sound almost as horrible as Darth Marok's dying wail.

Lowbacca was on the attack again and Kheykid reared to two legs to fight him. As they battled Arlen yelled to Jade and Terrid, "We'll hold him! Clear a path!"

Terrid hurried over to the exploded lift tube. Jade was right behind him. "How far down?" she asked.

"Two hundred meters, maybe more."

"Straight shot?"

"All the way."

An invisible force crunched down on the top of the lift tube. Exploded as it was, the ceiling collapsed easily. Jade pushed it all the way down, smashing more debris together, until the almost-flat rooftop disc was only a meter off the ground.

Jade hopped onto it first. She crouched atop the uneven surface and reached out to Terrid. Instead of taking her hand he used a Force-powered leap to propel himself on top of the broken lift. It shifted under combined weight but held. They'd have to use the Force to lower themselves down, two-hundred-plus meters, to Darth Krayt's catacomb.

"Arlen!" Jade called as he and Lowbacca battled Kheykid on the far side of the chamber.

"Hold on!" the man shouted but didn't stop battling Kheykid.

Then, with a short metal screech, the broken lift tube fell out from under their feet. It happened too fast to react. Jade and Terrid followed it down into the dark.

Darth Kheykid had begun this day determined to die well. Almost as soon as he'd joined the battle he found himself face-to-face with the Jedi Grand Master himself. It was the collision he'd hoped for and it might have even been the Force at working in bringing it, but unlike the supine Jedi who believed in submitting to the Force's will, Kheykid was a Sith. The Force was what he wrested his desires from, and victory against Grand Master Lowbacca was his to win or lose.

He knew the fighting style of both his enemies. He'd faced the human, Arlen Fel, twice during the Senex-Juvex Crisis. He'd been a fresh-made Lord and it had been his first time battling a Jedi. Time wore harder on humans than it did on Wookiees or Barabels. Twenty-five years had turned Fel's beard gray, slowed his reflexes, and drained his endurance.

Lowbacca, however, was just as powerful as when he and Kheykid had fought Abeloth together. Every mighty two-handed blow from the Wookiee's gold lightsaber nearly knocked aside Kheykid's shorter blades. He crossed both together and caught Lowbacca's attacks whenever he could, but the fragile and stubborn human kept close and attacked whenever Kheykid was exposed.

The Jedi didn't relent even after the collapsed lift tube had plunged down the shaft, taking Skywalker and the traitor with it. If they survived, Wyyrlok would deal with them. Kheykid was determined to finish these two himself, so he backed out of the vestibule chamber and led them down a narrow hall. Battles between Jedi and Sith were raging throughout the Temple, especially in the ground floor, but Kheykid led them up an old stone staircase. He dropped to all fours and scrambled up two flights, pausing several times to swipe his blades at them and keep them engaged in the fight.

When he reached the third level Kheykid led them into an empty hallway where no one would interfere. The chase and their pursuit had only sharpened his desire. Darth Xoran had killed a Jedi Grand Master. Though it had cost her life, she'd accomplished what no other Sith had done in over a thousand years. Kheykid craved to follow his master's legacy. He *lusted* for it. He drew power from that lust; he moved faster, blocked more attacks, even battled back some of the Wookiee's powerful blows. And as he fought Dark Kheykid, who'd started today ready to die for Darth Krayt's grand design, realized there was strength in personal ambition after all.

He could take the Grand Master. He knew he could, but Arlen Fel was always at his flanks, forcing him to defend instead of using both his blades for attack. Fel was drawing on the Force to give himself strength and speed and endurance, and again and again he dodged Kheykid's whipping tail-lashes and quick saber-thrusts. If Fel and Lowbacca were separated, Kheykid knew he could kill either of them. Together they'd fought him to a standstill and just might win.

He'd have to draw them apart. When they skirted close to one shut door, Kheykid used the Force to blow it out of its frame. He

slipped through the threshold and the Jedi followed. The chamber was on the outer edge of the pyramid, and a long translucent window stretched across the tilted wall. Another push from the Force burst its glass. The Jedi knew where he was going and tried to stop him, but when Fel blocked him from reaching the window, Kheykid pivoted and snapped his tail at the Jedi's legs. Fel was caught off-guard and didn't have time for a nimble jump. He stumbled back, lost balance. A killing blow would cost Kheykid a fatal half-second so he bounded on all fours for the window, jumped onto its glass-strewn edge, and grabbed the upper rim with two clawed hands. He looked at the Wookiee charging toward him, bore his teeth, and pulled his whole body upward. Just as he sunk all four sets of claws on the pyramid's blue-brick exterior he felt pain run through his body and realized he'd underestimate the Wookiee's reach. Lowbacca had taken the last two inches off his tail.

Kheykid hissed threw his pain and tried to draw strength from it. He pulled himself up the pyramid's slanted exterior, notching his claws in the cracks between rough brick. Lowbacca knew he'd been wounded and was climbing out to give pursuit. Kheykid had planned to fall on him as soon as he cleared the window but pain slowed him. The Barabel pulled himself further toward the peak, glancing over his shoulder to see Lowbacca climbing after him. The Wookiee sunk his claws into the same cracks and his lightsaber, humming gold blade still lit, was clamped tight between his fangs.

Kheykid drew on his pain and anger. He climbed faster, determined to get far enough ahead of Lowbacca, then turn and drop on him. And then they would fight, and then he would win, because there was strength in dark ambition after all.

The Hapan Battle Dragon held resolute in geosynchronous orbit above the Sith Temple. What it was waiting on, Marasiah didn't know, but the imminent arrival of the *Por Dun* was going to force it to act one way or the other. When the star destroyer was one minute from exiting the passage it was already sending its fighter wing ahead, and Marasiah made her decision.

"All fighters, this is Empress Fel." She made her voice as imperious as she could. "Fall in with Knight Squadron and initiate your attack runs on the Battle Dragon. Bombers, target the communications array beneath the lower disc. Everyone else, provide cover."

If that Battle Dragon was waiting for a signal from the ground, Marasiah would do her best to make sure it couldn't receive. The remaining eight TIE Sabers peeled out of the lower atmosphere. The *Por Dun*'s full fighter complement was rushing to join them and so were all the Battle Dragon's Miy'tils. Marasiah placed her ships in between them and waited for the friendly TIEs to get close.

"Shields on full," she told the pilots. "Break through the fighter screen and protect the bombers. Our target is the comm array above all."

She glanced at her scanners. The *Por Dun* had breached the ice-drifts and was cutting a straight line for Shedu Maad. The Battle Dragon was still locked in position but its double-discs rotated so it could aim the most cannons against the destroyer bearing down on it.

But before the capital ships could engage, the fighter wings collided in a messy brawl. The *Por Dun* had brought a mix of nimble TIE-Xs and heavy TIE Demolishers, and only Marasiah's squad flew fast but durable TIE Sabers. The Knights were forced to be everywhere at once, staying close to protect the bombers while ranging far enough to take the fight to the Miy'tils that hung around the battle's edge, waiting for a chance to attack.

The Force was with them now more than ever. Marasiah had tried to make the Imperial Knights into Jedi and soldiers both, and now they were exactly that, so attuned to each other's intentions that eight Sabers weaved and danced, defended and killed, as though governed by one mind. The Hapans, by contrast, had a messy defense. Some Miy'tils got drawn into pointless dogfights with the TIE-Xs while the ones that tried attack runs on the TIE Demolishers had poor coordination only limited success.

All the while, the bombers homed in on the Battle Dragon's lower disc and they dragged the fight with them. When they neared



firing range Marasiah ordered the TIE-Xs to draw as many Miy'tils away as possible while her Sabers fell in near the Demolishers, to protect them and to add their torpedoes to the attack. The TIE-Xs continued to fight bravely, and the Knights alerted each other to the Miy'tils that slipped through the screen so they could be destroyed without breaking formation.

When they got near enough, the Battle Dragons' turbolasers began spraying in their direction. One unlucky Demolisher was hit and burst, but the rest lumbered along, shifting position enough to dodge the bolts that came their way.

"Knights, Demolishers, focus all fire on that comm array," Marasiah called. "Acquire target. Mark. Ready. Fire!"

The Demolishers and Sabers all unleashed their warheads, two each. It would make a mighty blast but she didn't know if that would enough to break through the shields. A normal bombing formation would scatter after this shot and come around for another pass if necessary, but something- instinct or the Force- told Marasiah otherwise.

"All ships, hold position! Reacquire target lock!" She called. That Battle Dragon was looming close. Its laser blasts flashed bright and caught another Demolisher. The first barrage was almost at the shield barrier.

Right before it hit, she called, "All ships fire and break formation!"

They unleashed another wave and, finally, scattered. The Battle Dragon's turbolasers picked off another bomber just as its shields caught the first series of explosions. As Marasiah peeled away she made a tight curve beneath the warship and tilted her fighter so she could see the second wave hit.

This one tore right through the shields. The cluster of communications antennae that jutted out from the bottom of the Battle Dragon vanished in a molten fireball. It was exactly what she'd hoped for, and she prayed they'd stopped communication between the Hapans and the Sith below.

With the success of the attack run, the TIEs and Miy'tils spread out into a series of dogfights as chaotic as they were fierce. Despite

that, the battle no longer belonged to the swarming snubfighters. The Battle Dragon and the star destroyer had drawn close enough, and the space between them lit up in a storm of turbolaser fire, beautiful and deadly.

There was only one way the fight could end now, and Marasiah dove in to join it.

Two hundred meters was a long way to fall.

It worked in their favor in the end. The ruins of the lift tube jostled and scraped against the walls of the shaft on the way down, knocking them off their feet and throwing up a constant shower of sparks, but as Jade and Terrid pressed together at the center of the wreckage they had time and awareness enough to call on the Force. Terrid focused on raising a wall around them to deflect the sparks and chipped metal flying off the walls. Jade used the Force to slow their descent. Once she firmly grasped their plunging, twisted capsule in her mind she could lower it as slowly as she wished, and when they finally reached the bottom of the shaft it hit ground with a single crunch and went still.

The pact space echoed with the rasping of their breath. As they struggled upright Jade looked straight upward and saw only a very faint, very distant patch of light marking the place from which they'd come. She didn't know what was happening with Arlen and Lowbacca, but she was pretty certain they were still alive. She thought she'd feel Arlen's death at least.

Jade jumped when Terrid ignited his lightsaber. She took a step away and faced him. The red light spilled across his face, dyeing blue skin the color of his eyes. Stiffly he said, "We'll have to cut our way out."

From his saber's glow she could see the curvature and seal of twin metal doors. She turned on her violet blade and asked, "What's on the other side?"

"Just a short hallway. Then the vestibule. Krayt will be beyond that.

"What about Wyyrlok?"

He closed his eyes. "Can you feel that?"

Jade let her thoughts reach past the shut doors. A shudder ran through her body. There was a dark power just beyond, immense and brooding. It reminded her of nothing besides Abeloth.

Terrid seemed to sense her thoughts. He grabbed her forearm and squeezed. "We defeated Abeloth together. We can kill Krayt and Wyyrlok."

But they hadn't, not them alone. Jodram had played the biggest part. Without him, she didn't know what they were capable of.

There was only one way to find out, and only one direction to go. Terrid had insisted the great power in her blood could meet destiny's demands time and again. Praying he was right, she thrust her lightsaber into the metal door. Terrid did the same, and together they carved a portal large enough for both to climb through.

As he'd said, there was just a short corridor beyond, and then another set of doors. This section was visibly different from the pyramid above. Instead of being made from blue-stone bricks, the walls were carved through dark gray rock. The floor was made of patterned stone tiles, red and black like so many of those Sith used to mark their faces.

They stepped up to the second door together, and it slid open before them.

Jade and Terrid walked into the vestibule chamber. It was massive, with a cavernous ceiling and more red-and-black patterns on the floor. Despite its size it felt empty, and Jade's attention was quickly drawn to the only things of importance.

On the opposite wall were two swinging doors made of heavy black stone. They stood ten meters high and were sealed tight.

In the middle of the chamber, at the center of the complex red-and-black patterned whorl, was an old Chagrian woman with red-and-black marks over her face. She'd been sitting cross-legged, her midnight-dark robe obscuring her form, but when Jade and Terrid arrived she rose to her feet. Jade felt that she was the focal points of that immense dark power, but not its locus. That was coming from the chamber behind her.

Jade remembered what her father had said about the Wyyrlok he'd faced, and what it had taken to beat Darth Krayt's greatest servant. She held her lightsaber in front of her with both hands. Terrid did the same. They froze side-by-side halfway to the center of the chamber and watched. Wyyrlok stared back at them with glowing gold eyes.

The Chagrian bore a sharp-toothed smile. There was no joy in it. "You surprised us, Darth Terrid," she said, "Or have you reverted to a Jedi name?"

"I am what I choose to be," he said. "Not what *you* made me."

"We made you stronger than you were. Better."

"No. You didn't." He had the tone of decision.

Wyyrlok's eyes shifted to Jade. "And a Skywalker. You, I expected."

"Why?" She flexed her hands over the lightsaber hilt. "Because of what my dad did to yours?"

Her lip curled, baring more teeth. "You know nothing about my father."

"Enough talk," Terrid said. He stepped slowly away from Jade, widening the space between them but drawing no closer to Wyyrlok. "There's a lot more Jedi up there. And when they're done slaughtering your Sith they're going to join us down here and kill your dreaming old man in his coffin."

"I thought you'd want that pleasure yourself."

"That's why I came down first," he snarled.

"I thought so," Wyyrlok said, and threw up her arms. Force lightning burst from either palm. Jade held her lightsaber out and caught it, but the force of it kept her in place. Terrid also held up his lightsaber but he pressed forward, step by stubborn step. Jade could feel the anger brewing inside him, anger he intentionally summoned to battle Wyyrlok's own dark power.

Wyyrlok continued to throw lightning out from her hand as if it were nothing. The energy of which she was the focus seemed to be growing greater, as though she was drawing more and more of it from Krayt's coffin, filling herself to the point of bursting.

Terrid burst first. He dropped his saber and cast a volley of his own lightning. Wyyrlok caught it in her palm, collapsing its destructive power on herself, but in doing so she dropped the blast she was throwing at Jade. The Jedi charged forward and was on Wyyrlok in an instant. A lightsaber appeared in the Chagrian's hand and a red blade crashed against violet.

That threw her attention away from Terrid, and the Chiss used the opening. He took Wyyrlok on the other side and she darted back to avoid his blow. She was fast for an old woman; she dodged and came up with lightsaber in one hand, Force lightning crackling off the fingertips of the other. She cast lightning at Jade and then Terrid to keep them back, but the Chiss charged forward again. This time Wyyrlok pivoted, threw lightning at Jade, and used her lightsaber to deflect more attacks from Terrid.

Jade struggled against the storm of energy. It was like all those years ago, when she and her father had battled Darth Xoran. Wyyrlok was brewing a whirlwind of Dark Side energies inside her, turning herself into a cauldron of destructive energy, not caring if it killed her, only if it took out her foes.

Her father had given his power and his life to protect Jade from Xoran's destruction. His power was still with her, in her, and as she struggled against Wyyrlok's attacks she reached deep inside herself until she found the still, peaceful place, untouched by the dark storm, that was the wellspring of true Force power.

Jade drew from that power, was enriched and strengthened by it, and she stepped forward. Wyyrlok's lightning leaped around her blade and danced across her skin, lacing it with burns, but she didn't feel the pain. She didn't fear and she didn't slow down.

Wyyrlok was so distracted battling Terrid's angry attacks that she didn't notice Jade's peaceful approach until she was right beside her. The Chagrian recoiled, too late to fully avoid Jade's horizontal swipe. The violet blade cut through Wyyrlok's robes and through her abdomen, right beneath the ribcage.

When Jade opened Wyyrlok's flesh she released a blast of white-hot power, greater even than the Force lightning. It knocked Jade and Terrid both off their feet and sent them skidding across the

flagstones. Wyyrlok staggered, still clutching her lightsaber, while the other hand held her torn side. White flame flickered out from beneath her spread palm and Jade realized in full what Wyyrlok was doing. Like Xoran she was cultivating the raw power until it was literally consuming her from the inside, but unlike Xoran the power was not just her own. She was drawing from Krayt, filling herself even more, and her half-devoured flesh was the only thing holding pure destruction at bay.

She was a storm about to burst; a bomb about to explode.

"You understand, Jedi," Wyyrlok snarled. "No matter what, you're not leaving here alive."

The battle with Kheykid had left Arlen breathless, but the Barabel's flight to the outside of the pyramid gave no respite. Lowbacca had charged after the deadly Sith, lopping off the tip of his tail but nothing more, then followed him onto the Sith Temple's sloping blue-brick exterior. Arlen didn't have the natural equipment to join them but he couldn't leave the fight either. As much as he wanted to go back down to that broken vestibule and follow Jade and Terrid down the shaft- they were still alive, he *knew* it- he couldn't abandon his original teacher either.

So he sprinted back to the stairwell they'd originally chased Kheykid up, then began climbing more flights. He was too exhausted to bound up them but didn't have to. Lowbacca and Kheykid were ascending via slow crawl, and he reached out with the Force to touch his old Master's mind. The Wookiee was focused on tracking Kheykid as the Barabel climbed further toward the pyramid's peak, but just feeling his presence was enough for Arlen to track his physical location. He tried to stay on-level with Lowbacca or a flight ahead, but when he felt the frenzy of a battle rejoined he broke into a sprint again, pumping his old legs and pushing himself up two more flights.

Darth Kheykid had been the first Sith Lord he'd ever faced. Kheykid had killed Tamar's sister, changing her life forever, and he'd captured Arlen's first apprentice and molded him into

something horrible. This fight was personal, and it wasn't going to end without him.

Lowbacca had chased Kheykid two-thirds of the way to the peak of the pyramid when the Barabel finally saw his chance. He didn't hesitate to take it. Without looking back at the Grand Master, without giving him a warning, Kheykid used all four limbs to push himself off the slope. He used the Force to spin himself in mid-air and re-ignite the sabers at his wrists. When he fell on Lowbacca they met blades-first. The Wookiee called his lightsaber to his right paw and held it in front of him while his left paw still grabbed onto the brick. Red sabers collided with gold and Kheykid brought both feet down onto the Wookiee's shoulders. The force of impact tore his grip loose and both of them went tumbling down the slope. Kheykid felt scalding gold pain skim across his right bicep while one of his own blades jabbed Lowbacca in the stomach. The Barabel used a small push of the Force to direct their tumble onto the sole balcony jutting out from this side of the pyramid.

They landed together on the platform, then sprawled away. As they disentangled Lowbacca's lightsaber drew a scorched line down his right thigh, while Kheykid's blade burned through the fur over the Wookiee's temple but just missed his skull. The Barabel buckled as he tried to stand with one bad leg. He stretched his tail out for balance and raised both sabers in front of him as the Wookiee got to his feet as well.

Then they were on each other again. They were both injured and dazed. Kheykid jabbed the tip of one blade into the Wookiee's side, drawing a scream but not slowing him down. He followed up with a messy one-armed swipe but Lowbacca caught his wrist and pulled so hard Kheykid's left shoulder dislocated with a pop. Pain overwhelmed him and his injured leg gave out. Even as he collapsed he struck out with his right-handed blade. He and the Wookiee were so close their fangs flashed in each others' faces and Kheykid cut a strip of flesh and muscle from Lowbacca's sword-arm.

They collapsed on each other but Kheykid was on top, and he still had one blade he could use. Straddling the Wookiee, he rose up

on his knees and drew his right arm back for a lethal blow. Their eyes met, and he knew he'd won. No matter what came next, even if the Battle Dragon overhead blasted this place to atoms and erased anyone who would tell of his accomplishment, *he* would know. He'd done Darth Xoran's legacy proud. He'd done himself proud. Kheykid felt filled to bursting with a predator's vicious joy.

And before he brought the blade down he felt a weight slam into him from behind, and then he *did* burst. A white nova filled his brain and exploded outward in a flash of white heat. Then the heat was gone, the nova gone, and everything left behind was as cold and dead as ancient stardust.

When Arlen's blade plunged through the back of Kheykid's neck, through his skull and into his brain, there was a release of dark-side energy that burst through the wound, through his open mouth and the soft tissue of his eyes. It was bright enough to make Arlen flinch and pain tingled across his skin, but it only lasted a moment. Then the Barabel's corpse slumped on top of Lowbacca's.

Arlen grabbed the heavy body and tipped it off the Wookiee's. "Master? Are you okay? *Master?*"

Lowbacca gave a weak groan and struggled to sit up. Arlen scoured his torn robes and burnt, tangled fur. He had wounds alright; some minor, some deeper. The two stab wounds in his abdomen were the worst. Lowbacca raised his good arm and squeezed Arlen's shoulder harder. He roared gratitude but said he didn't think he could stand.

"Don't worry, Master, we'll get you something," Arlen said.

He reached with the Force to find the Jedi inside the pyramid. They were still fighting and hard, but they seemed to have winnowed down the Sith's numbers. The light was overcoming the dark but he knew none of these Sith would be taken alive. They'd fight to the last and kill more Jedi before they were done. He only hoped Master K'Kruhk was faring better in recovering the Sith younglings.

"Just stay here, Master. I'll get a healer. I promise."



Arlen stepped back from the Wookie, picked his lightsaber off the flagstones, and placed it in Lowbacca's paw. Then he hurried back inside the pyramid. Somewhere down below, Terrid and Jade were still alive and still fighting. He'd do what he could to help them, but until he made sure the Grand Master would survive, they'd have to fend for themselves.

In the end, it was simply a battle between a Hapan Battle Dragon and an Imperial *Pellaeon*-class star destroyer. Even accounting for differences in crew proficiency and blind strokes of luck, there was only one way that matchup could end.

Once most of the Miy'tils had been destroyed, Marasiah and her fighters pulled to the edge of the battle zone. The view from there was astonishing. The double-disc and the bigger pale wedge had drawn close. The space between them was still aglow with exchanged turbolaser volleys, and while the Hapan ship had a faster rate of fire it simply had less guns than the *Por Dun*, less missile turrets, and most importantly, less powerful shields. Marasiah watched as its energy screens crumbled and the *Por Dun*'s missile salvos began to chew the edges out of its upper disc.

It had not been lost on her or her husband that Davek bore some similarities to Hapes' Sith Queen. Both were self-appointed monarchs who'd waged war against partisans for an older regime, but likeness didn't stretch much further. Davek defended the changes his father had brought to the Empire while Queen Serissa brutally slaughtered those loyal to her grandmother. She'd returned Hapes to hermetic isolation while Davek had sought continued engagement with the rest of the galaxy. And, most relevant to this battle, Davek's battle with the Restorationists had forced his military to evolve. It had developed new tactics, new weapons, and most importantly, new vessels like the *Pellaeon*-class destroyer. Serissa's Hapans, for all their fanaticism, were using warships decades behind the times.

It was inevitable, but the Hapans kept fighting. Even at Kovix-589, most of the Restorationists had known when to surrender. Marasiah didn't know if it was some Sith compulsion

that forced them to fight until the end or if Serissa had instilled suicidal devotion through secular means. In the end it didn't matter. They died just the same.

Marasiah watched from her cockpit as the *Por Dun*'s missiles ripped a huge gash in the Battle Dragon's upper disc. A wash of turbolasers cut across it and obliterated the stout bridge tower. More blasts tore away the extended struts connecting the upper and lower discs. The explosions that cut the ship in half seemed to come from the inside, as if a reactor had overloaded. Even as the two discs drifted apart, the *Por Dun* continued to fire. Every meter of sleek silver hull became gnarled and black. Fires burned through everything until the star destroyer finally ceased its attack. Smoldering flames still furred out from the largest chunks of wreckage as the atmosphere trapped inside was sucked into fires, but there was only so much to burn. By the time the *Por Dun* started pulling the largest pieces of wreckage away from the planet with its tractor beam, the last burning had died out. Even the embers had gone cool.

There was no hope to survive and no choice but to fight.

Wyyrlok moved more slowly for the wound in her side but its pain seemed to add strength to her power. Every time Terrid's saber clashed with hers, his own was nearly knocked from his hand. Jade struggled against the renewed blasts of Force lightning. It was hard to even get near Wyyrlok.

Terrid couldn't accept it would end like this. He hadn't savored revenge like expected but this was different. As he felt the dark power radiating off Wyyrlok he knew the power to be Krayt's, knew it was the power that had corrupted his life and so many others, and as he battled Wyyrlok he found a new kind of rage, not based on jealousy for her strength or self-hate for being outplayed. It was an anger based on grief for what he could have been, *should* have been, had the Sith not corrupted him.

The anger powered his attacks. It was not the power of the Jedi he should have been but it was the power he used.

When he next got close enough to slash Wyyrlok with his saber he instead held the sword up to block and unleashed a close-range blast of lightning. It caught her head-on, scalding a face already torn by scars and boils as it burned from the inside. Wyyrlok let out a pained screech and Jade took it as her signal to attack from the side, aiming for the same hole she'd carved in the Sith earlier.

Then Wyyrlok spun. Black robes flew in both their faces. Terrid jumped back but not before a lightsaber lanced out of the swirl and caught him in the side. He staggered back as pain blossomed from beneath his left lung. He still raised his saber in defense but Wyyrlok had turned her attention into Jade. A blast of lightning had caught the Jedi in the middle of a diagonal swing, stunning her, and Wyyrlok, still spinning, lowered her lightsaber to cut through Jade's thigh.

The Jedi screamed and collapsed. A flick of the Force hurled her through the air. Jade landed on her shoulder and rolled. Her leg was still attached but Terrid could see the black scorch-mark of a cut that had gone halfway through, probably slicing bone. It would be impossible to stand on.

"A Skywalker who denies her full strength!" Wyyrlok spat blood. "An overgrown child pretending to be a Sith! Pathetic! None of you have Darth Krayt's vision. None of you could understand his power."

That power was clearly eating her from the inside. Lightning was sparking at random across her exposed skin, carving more black scars by the minute. Blood ran from the corners of her eyes and teeth looked like charred embers in her mouth. He'd felt Jade's thoughts as they battled her, and she was right. Wyyrlok was a bomb about to burst, and once they died her flesh would no longer contain the Force storm swirling inside her. It could easily bring down this vestibule, and with it a thousand tons of stone.

Enough to kill Krayt, surely.

Especially if that door was open.

As he sent that thought to Jade- and it passed so naturally, as it had when they'd been apprentices so long ago- Wyyrlok began to stagger toward Terrid. "You are the worst," she said. "Not Jedi. Not

Sith. No vision, no purpose. Just a lifetime of fumbling with no direction... Just like a vermin... You don't *deserve* to use the Force."

Terrid swayed on his feet. He was lucky lightsabers cauterized wounds; otherwise the gut-stab would have bled him out already. His strength was fading fast but he could last long enough if Jade did what he'd told her.

"I'll put you out of your misery... And then the Skywalker..." Wyyrlok panted as she lurched closer. Almost in striking range. She broken too, dying, so damned slow. "And then... perhaps... the Jedi can send someone *better*."

One more step. He sent Jade to wait. "Don't count on it," Terrid rasped.

She took the last step. Jade, lying on the floor, too hurt to stand, whole body aching with pain, nonetheless drew on her great well of power to grab the doors to Krayt's sanctum. Of all the Sith Terrid knew, only Wyyrlok had the power to pull them open. Jade did more than pull. With a crack of thunder she wrenched them off their hinges and threw the stone giants onto the vestibule floor.

The flagstones buckled and shattered. Wyyrlok was shocked and lost balance but Terrid threw himself forward and thrust his saber down, through her stomach, through her hip. He cut her open and dark scalding power burst out of her. Terrid simply stood there, ready to die in her blast and die with Krayt, regretting only that Jade had to die too-

Dark energy stormed through his body, scalding him, blinding him with pain, but he did not die.

The pain did not relent. He struggled to find sense through it. He pried opened his eyes and saw Wyyrlok's face, red marks now overwhelmed by black burn scars, blood streaming from her eyes and mouth. She'd collapsed to the ground and he was bent over her, but her arm was stretched up and her hand around was his throat. Lightning cracked all over her skin, danced up her arm, and scalded his face. He tried to scream but her vice-grip stole all breath.

His lightsaber had fallen from his hand. He couldn't defend himself. Even his anger was useless against this bursting vessel of Darth Krayt's power.

Not like this, he thought. *Not like this.*

And then a flash of violet cut across his vision. He was thrown back by another burst of painful energy, worse than even before, but it disappeared just as soon as it came. Terrid found himself lying on his back, on those cracked black-and-red stones. His whole body wracked with agony but he rolled onto his side and tried to look around. First he saw Wyyrlok's arm, severed at the elbow. Then he saw Jade's lightsaber. Then he saw Jade and Wyyrlok both, lying far apart, both crumpled on the floor as helpless as he was. Lightning still sparked over the Sith's piled black robes.

Terrid reached out with the Force and felt Jade still conscious. He rolled onto his stomach and tried to crawl, pulling himself with hands and elbows. He grabbed Jade's saber on the way and tried to kick but it made the pain in his speared-through stomach worse. He pulled himself anyway. Darkness clouded his vision and threatened to swallow him but he kept crawling. Darkness went, came again, went. When he got close to Jade he reached out and placed his hand over hers, lightsaber between their palms, fingertips locked together.

"Tha... Thank you," Terrid rasped.

He bent his neck back to watch her eyes flicker open. Is it... over?"

"Very soon." Terrid adjusted his head so he could see Wyyrlok again. She was crawling too, using her remaining hand to drag herself between the fallen stone doors, through the high threshold and into her master's chamber. Terrid's vision blurred, but he could still see the raised dais and outer casing of Darth Krayt's coffin.

When she died the energy from Krayt would be released. It would destroy her, destroy Krayt, bring down this roof and destroy Jade and him too.

He would have been satisfied with that, but he didn't want Jade Skywalker to die. Terrid, Wyyrlok, and Krayt deserved whatever ugly fate awaited Dark Siders after death. But not her. She deserved life.

"Can you... walk?" he whispered.

She didn't respond at first and he was afraid she'd passed out. He tried to nudge her with the Force. She groaned and said, "I can't... can't stand... and... no place... to go."

She was right. Hope lay two hundred meters over their heads and there was no way to ascent the shaft. He watched Wyyrlok drag herself over the threshold rim, closer to Krayt's coffin. More sparks flashed off her dying body. Almost the end now. He tried to be satisfied. Dying with Jade was better than he deserved.

Darkness, light. Darkness, light. Consciousness fading in and out. Intimations of death and life's stubborn refusal. It couldn't last.

He thought he heard a voice: *Jade? Jade? Wharn?* A memory, maybe. He tried to place that voice.

And then two boots stomped in front of his face. Terrid jerked against the floor and rolled onto his back. He saw Arlen Fel crouching over him and Jade, examining both.

"You're alive," he marveled. "You're both *alive*."

"Can't walk..." Jade said.

"Don't worry. We've got a fiberchord rigged and people up top ready to bring you up. Just hold on."

"Wait," Terrid croaked. He tried to gesture to Wyyrlok. "She's not... dead... yet."

Arlen put a hand on his lightsaber. "Then I'll finish her."

"No. When she dies... All Krayt's power..."

"Like a bomb," Jade said with a blood-flecked cough. "We need to get out."

Arlen looked back at them. "Okay. Okay. I'll call a couple more people down, they can get you both, and then—"

"No time," he said. He placed his palms on the flagstones and tried to push himself upright. Arlen helped him sit, then helped pull Jade up. Her face was darkened by dirt, flecked with blood laced by burn scars. Despite it all she looked resilient.

"Take her. Hurry," he rasped to Arlen. "We all know... which of us deserves... to survive."

Arlen and Jade looked at each other, and then back at him, and at that moment he felt like he was seeing them as they could have

been, as they should have been, as they never would be: an old master and an old friend.

Jade stretched out a hand. "Wharn... Thank you."

He reached. Fingertips pressed fingertips. A bit of strength passed between them, a bit of warmth. A bit of what should have been. It was enough.

Arlen cradled Jade in both arms and lifted her up, taking special care with her leg. He remained seated on the floor and watched Arlen carry her out of the chamber, through the short hallway, into the darkness where the wrecked lift tube and their ride up waited.

He waited too. He didn't hear them ascend. He fumbled out with his weakening Force powers to sense them, but they were far away. They were safe. He was satisfied.

He waited. He was surprised to be still alive. He planted his palms on the floor and tried to push himself upright. Pain stabbed out from his abdomen and racked his body, but he kept pushing. He found a little bit of the Force to pull himself upright. He swayed. The world spun and blurred and tempted toward darkness, then grew light again. He was still alive.

He started toward Darth Krayt's sanctum in slow, staggering steps. Each one hurt but it got easier to shamble as he went along. The threshold edged closer. The threshold surrounded him and swallowed him and when he stepped inside the final chamber he saw Darth Wyyrlok's black-cloaked form pulled hallway upright, leaning with her back against the side of Krayt's coffin. Her chest moved very slowly. Sparks had turned her whole face black and charred her eyes. Her remaining hand was in her lap, clutching a sharp black fragment from one of the cracked flagstones.

Then he looked into the coffin. The translucent crystal lid was still in place, but beneath it, he saw nothing.

The coffin was empty. Krayt was not there.

He caught the coffin's edged to keep from collapsing. He didn't understand. He looked at Wyyrlok to see the Sith's head tilted up at his, staring up at him with sightless eyes.

"*This* is the power that could never be yours," Darth Wyyrlok said, and drove the black shard into her breast. He was overwhelmed by what exploded out of her: pain, heat, awful light, and the final darkness.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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Despite the damage of the battle, the stormtroopers left in the Hapan C-and-C managed to get the most critical pieces of equipment running. Hunched over a backup console, Roan was able to discern the scope of the battle in orbit and watch it as it changed. After his conversation with his father, the Imperials shifted their battle plan to target the enemy flagship. After a strangely disorganized, lurching start, his father's destroyers moved to entrap *Black Majesty* and once it was boxed in, *Invincible* surged forward and deliver the killing blow.

When *Black Majesty's* marker winked out on Roan's display, he turned to the stormtrooper sergeant beside him and said, "Start broadcasting that surrender signal again. Maybe this time they'll listen."

"Gladly, Your Majesty."

The trooper hurried off to comply. These stormies had conjured miracles out of broken equipment with skill he could only envy. His father's Empire would be nothing without the little people who got things done. He had to remember that.

The thrill of success only partially lifted his spirits. Vitor, Treis, and Mohrgan were still pursuing Queen Serissa. Roan yearned to be out there with them but Vitor had been right; someone needed

to stay here, contact their father, and hopefully bring an end to this fight. He'd been right to stay, but he was still anxious. As he looked around the chamber he spotted Nat Skywalker and Elliah Chalk, both listless as well. Nat wanted to fight with his cousin and Elliah seemed strangely deflated, as if she'd expected to do more on this mission than just guide them to the C-and-C.

When the sergeant announced the surrender signal had been sent, Roan looked back at the tactical readout. He hoped that the signal, the destruction of *Black Majesty*, and the death of that mind-controlling Sith Lord would finally combine to cow those Hapans into laying down arms.

The backup tactical display was frustratingly limited in the information it provided, but it seemed to Roan that some Battle Dragons and Nova cruisers were starting to shift away from the Imperials, to the battle zone's edge. After a few minutes more and more ships joined them. It didn't look like surrender or even retreat; it looked like the Hapans didn't know what to do and had made a temporary pause to consider their options.

Roan went over to the communications station. "Sergeant, let's hail *Invincible* and see what's going on."

"Right away, Majesty."

As Roan stood by the console, Elliah and Nat edged closer. They wanted to know how this would end as much as he did. The holo-projector had gotten blasted during the fighting but the audio transmitter worked fine. Roan expected to hear his father again first-thing, but instead he got another man's voice.

"This is *Invincible*, General Lukas Briggs speaking."

Roan remembered that name. One of his father's Voidwalkers. "This is Prince Roan Fel. General, we see the Hapans seem to be pulling back from engagement."

"That's correct, Your Majesty. One of their ships just hailed us to discuss a cease-fire."

"That's excellent. Is my father talking to them now?"

The simple question yielded a long pause. Roan waited with growing disquiet until Briggs said, "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. Your father is dead."

It felt like he'd been dropped into an abyss. He braced himself against the console and managed to say, "Dead? How? *Invincible*.... It wasn't attacked."

"He was assassinated on the bridge. We're... still not sure of the specifics. I'm very sorry, Your Majesty. The whole Empire will grieve for this."

His father, the Emperor. Dead here, dead now, after finally winning his long grueling war for the Empire's soul.

"I'm very sorry," Briggs repeated. "Is the, ah... is your brother with you?"

"No. No. He's...." Vitor. An Emperor. "He's not here now."

"I understand. Your Majesty, I'll handle cease-fire talks with the Hapans."

He'd forgotten those in an instant. "Yes. Thank you, General. Does my... Have you told my mother?"

"Not yet. We're having trouble contacting the Shedú Maad team. But we'll keep trying."

"Thank you, General." The buzz of faint static yawned to fill their comm line. Finally Roan said, "I'll hail you again," and killed the link.

He was suddenly aware of everyone else: the tired Hapan commandos, the stormtroopers radiating shock even through their masks, Nat and Elliah with faces full of concern. They seemed to spin and tilt around him, like the world had gone off its axis to waver uncontrollably.

Roan had never wanted to come here. He'd thought his father's mission to free Hapes was a misguided venture and consoled himself with the thought that, after one more campaign, they'd finally settle into peacetime rebuilding. There'd be no peace for his father, or him or Vitor or their mother. Davek Fel's last misstep had been the fatal one.

When it was clear Roan had nothing to say, the stormtrooper sergeant called, "The Emperor is dead. Long live the Emperor!"

"Long live the Emperor!" the other troopers echoed, and some Hapans joined too.

Roan didn't. He was too dazed and weak to speak. His eyes drifted across the spinning scene until they stopped on Elliah's. In their dark compassion was the only solace to be found.

It was impossible to have missed Darth Maleth's final moments. The old Sith had blazed with power greater than ever before and made himself a conduit for the Force at its most raw and destructive. Yet when he'd flared the brightest he'd been suddenly extinguished, without even a cry of agony in the Force marking his obliteration.

That was when Darth Kroan realized that they were in trouble.

He hadn't expected Darth Saydel to stay and die with Maleth and he wasn't disappointed. He could feel her presence in the Force, proud as ever but also anxious. He couldn't tell if she was making a run for *Intruder* but if Jedi were overrunning the Fountain Palace it was highly possible. He fully intended to get there first and suspected her people had more important things to do than stop him.

When he stepped out of his chamber he saw the corridor empty, his guards drawn away. He wished she'd kept at least one to watch him; the Fountain Palace's insides were a labyrinth of passageways both grandiose and secret, and embarrassing as it was, he had no idea how to get to back to his ship. He did his best to retrace familiar pathways and guide himself back to the hangar but it surely wasn't the best route.

Help came with Darth Saydel. He felt her Force presence, nearby and just as anxious as him. If she was heading for *Intruder*, he was confident he could convince her to let him join. If she wasn't, he might be able to steer her. Either way, he preferred running into her than the Jedi swarming the Palace.

He found her at the opposite end of a long white-marble hallway. She had a dozen guards with her who immediately raised their weapons. Kroan already had his lightsaber in his hand and ignited it, but the guards didn't fire and Saydel didn't reach for her own weapon. She stared at him across the distance.

"I felt Maleth die," said Kroan. "Did they take the command center?"

"Yes," Saydel sniffed. "They've destroyed my flagship as well."

"Then come with me. We'll escape on *Intruder* together."

"I'm not surrendering my kingdom to the Jedi," she spat.

"You won't. As long as you're alive your soldiers will rally to you." From what he'd seen it was probably true. "We must get to the hangar and escape. We'll go up to orbit and join your fleet. You can't fight another day if you die here."

And she stared at him, eyes narrowed, until she decided, "You can't find the way by yourself, can you?"

Kroan hissed breath between his teeth and said nothing.

Saydel chopped a hand and her guards lowered their weapons. "Come with me, Darth Kroan. We can fight another day *together*."

Vitor had thought he was ready to die, but as they chased Serissa's Force-presence through grand halls and hidden corridors the fear came back. It was the kind he'd had at the very beginning, the chill in the very center of his chest that threatened to blank and his mind and freeze his body. He could tell himself he'd die well, and he'd done everything to prepare for it, but he was still at the edge of a precipice. What lay beyond he didn't know, couldn't know. Maybe it was dissolution in the Force, maybe it was some life-after-death. Maybe it was pure oblivion.

Marin could sense his fear, just as he could sense her resolve. She was still fiercely denying his coming death and had set herself to save him. He didn't grudge her that resolve. In her own way she needed it. It would hurt her all the more when she died and the fact that he'd be unable to help her made the waiting dark all the worse.

Terrified and determined, they both followed Allana as the woman guided them through the Palace. At first they retraced many of the paths they'd taken from the hangar, passing many dead bodies and blaster-scorched walls, but soon Allana was leading them down a different route, through white-marble corridors untouched by violence.

"We're getting close," she said, almost to herself.

"Is she on this level?" Tanith asked. She'd kept pace with Allana the whole time. Marin and Vitor were right behind them, eight Hapan commandos after them, with Treis and Mohrgan bringing up the rear.

"Not this level," Allana said. "She's beneath us. Three or four floors, I think."

Vitor didn't like the sound of that. All the lift tubes in the palace had been disabled. "Are we heading for a staircase?"

"Something better. And I think she'll be crossing there too."

"This part of the palace hasn't changed?" asked Tanith.

"Not the part we're going to it. I doubt it, anyway."

Allana volunteered no more than that. Instead she picked up her pace, and those behind her hurried as well. She guided them down three more corridors and around four turns, and finally out into the open.

Not outside, though when Vitor followed her through the door that was his first thought. It was a massive atrium made from a shaft that cut down the heart of the Palace. The ceiling dome high above was made of stained-glass that must have lit a beautiful rainbow on sunny days, but on this overcast one their faint colors placed everything in a dim light. The circular chamber was no more than thirty meters in diameter but it rose at least ten storeys from top to bottom. Walkways crisscrossed the atrium from different directions at different levels, and with a quick count Vitor gathered they were six levels from the lush green garden on the bottom level.

"Which level do we need to get down to?" asked Marin as she bent over the guard-rail and peered down.

"I'm not sure." Allana's brows drew together. "I.... think she's coming."

With trepidation, Vitor reached into the Force. He felt it too, presence that was dark, determined, and anxious all at once. At least one presence, maybe more.

Marin stepped back from the rail and looked at him. With her eyes and the Force she promised she'd protect him. He had no doubt that she'd try.

Then the atrium erupted in laserfire. It shot upward from below and everyone dropped to a crouch. As Tanith's commandos crawled to the catwalk's edge to return fire, Vitor joined them. He peeked down to see figures three levels below, crossing a walkway that ran perpendicular to theirs. He counted a handful of black-armored Hapan guards shooting upward with their rifles but what drew his attention more were the two without blasters. One was a man in black robes with his bald head darkened by scars. It was the same Sith he'd faced on *Nemesis*. The other was a woman in a black and gold dress that looked martial despite the swirl of its skirts. Her hair was black, her face pale.

It was the woman who was going to kill him, and the sight of her froze him in fear.

Not so the others. Allana grabbed her lightsaber and called on them to attack. Vitor pulled from the edge and looked over his shoulder to see Treis and Mohrgan with their white blades ignited, ready to vault the opposite railing. As he scrambled to his feet they threw themselves over the rail and dropped.

The younger Knights' bravery shamed him out of his fear. Vitor grabbed his lightsaber and ignited. Marin was right there beside him, gold weapon blazing. Their eyes met; she gave him a firm nod. She pulled herself over the rail and jumped and he was just a second behind her.

Treis and Mohrgan had landed on the walkway three levels down, right in the center of Serissa's guards. Mohrgan kicked one guard over the rail; Treis disarmed another and used the Force to knock a third off the walkway. Two more guards had just opened fire when Vitor and Marin landed right behind them. Two quick slashes dropped them both.

The remaining guards had split away from the center of the walkway and fired at the Knights as they edged toward either exit. Marin and Vitor stumbled backward until their shoulders pressed against those of Mohrgan and Treis. It took all their concentration to deflect the hail of laserfire coming from both directions.

Through the light-show Vitor would see Serissa holding back by the door through which she'd come. He saw the lightsaber in her

hand, not yet ignited. They couldn't have killed Retor; he risked a look over his shoulder to see the other Sith on the opposite end of the walkway.

Retor ignited his saber like was ready to join in, but just as he did so more people dropped down. Fiberchord grapplers dropped Tanith and her commandos, who immediately opened fire on the Hapan guards, on Serissa and Retor. A single red blade shot out from Serissa's lightsaber. Both Sith fought back laser-blasts as Allana dropped down, Force-assisted, beside Marin and Vitor.

Just as the commandos finished the last guards, Serissa jumped into the fray. She was too far away from Vitor but just the sight of her made him freeze in fear again. Her single-bladed saber cut down the two closest commandos. With a motion of the hand she picked Tanith from her feet and threw her off the walkway.

The other soldiers hesitated before attacking. For a moment the battle on the walkway went as still. Serissa stood by one door, Retor the other. The guards they'd brought had fallen and a cluster of knights and commandos occupied the middle of the walkway, ready to attack in either direction.

A deep, familiar voice called from behind Vitor and said, "I'm sorry, Majesty, but I think I know the way from here."

"Darth Kroan!" Serissa barked. "Wait!"

Vitor pivoted just in time to see other Sith turn and sprint through the door.

The commandos nearest Serissa didn't waste her shock. All three opened fire and with a snarl the queen barely got her lightsaber up in time. Her next Force-blast knocked them off-balance but not off the walkway. Serissa bent forward and charged. Just as she reached the commandos she triggered the blade on the other end of her lightsaber, and with the elegance of an accomplished pike-fighter she spun two fans of red light that cut all three women in two.

Then she was on the Jedi.

An invisible punch knocked Vitor away from her. *Marin*, he thought, as his cousin's red *beskar* figure jumped ahead. As he scrambled to his feet he looked behind him to see Treis and



Mohrgan, still dumbfounded, looking at the doorway through which the other Sith had escaped.

"After him! Go!" Vitor shouted, and they went with two commandos chasing. The four of them probably wouldn't be enough to stop Retor from reaching his ship. They'd probably call Roan and Vitor prayed his brother could handle it.

Vitor jumped to his feet just as Serissa took the head off one commando and impaled another with the opposite blade. Her twin blades could claim the entire width of the walkway at once. She danced away from the corpses in a swirl of red light and black skirts, placing the bodies between her and the Jedi. Vitor realized that she had already dispatched all the commandos. There was only four of them left standing. One Jedi Knight, one Imperial prince, a Sith queen and a Jedi one.

Serissa stood with her back to the door but didn't retreat. Her eyes had taken an angry yellow glow as she held her double-bladed lightsaber horizontally in front of her, waiting. Vitor joined Marin in standing beside Allana. The urgency of the fight had dissolved his fear.

Allana lunged first. Serrisa blocked her first low blow, then spun her other blade to attack. Vitor and Marin rushed in together to join the clash: red blades against blue, Sith versus Jedi; queen of darkness versus queen of light.

Grief was a well he could sink into forever, and Roan was actually grateful when his personal comlink started buzzing. When he flicked it on and heard Treis' voice instead of his brother's he felt relieved, but not for long.

"Roan, we need help!" It sounded like his friend was running. "We found two Sith. Vitor and Allana are fighting Serissa. This other one, Kroan, I think he's going for the hangar."

"I'll help," Roan said. Killing a Sith was exactly what he wanted to do right now.

"Head him off at the hangar! Can you get back there?"

"I can try. Just hold on."

Roan shut off the commlink and found all eyes on him. He looked straight at Nat Skywalker. "There's a Sith heading for the hangar."

The young man nodded. "Then we'll stop him."

"Good answer. Let's go."

As they started for the exit Elliah blocked them. "Are you sure you're okay for a fight?"

"Very," Roan said. There was nothing he wanted more.

"Do you remember the fastest way back?"

"I can find it."

"I'll show you."

"You don't have to do that," Nat said.

"Please. Just let me help."

Roan didn't want her to come, didn't want to put her in danger, but he didn't want to waste time either. What he wanted was a little blood in recompense for his father's.

"Okay," he told her. "Show us where to go,"

Even though they battled her three against one, it seemed impossible to land a killing blow on Serissa Lohr. They had numbers on their side but the terrain was in her favor. The walkway was too narrow for them to attack her all at once and she stubbornly defied attempts to knock her down into the gardens below. When the battle started Marin threw herself into a somersault over the Sith's head. Serissa had swiped upward, lightsaber sizzling against *beskar*, then continually blocked Marin's attacks from behind as Vitor and Allana tried to take her from the front. She was constantly moving despite the constricted space; both feet never touched the ground for more than a second and her blades were a constant deadly whirl.

The battle dragged on, one draining minute after another. Allana quickly found herself short of breath, face slick with sweat. This fight to claim the future of Hapes was what her life had been building toward, the destiny waiting on her for the past forty years, but that was decades too many. Serissa was a nimble, fierce fighter but not without weaknesses. She overextended her attacks and

relied too much on her double-bladed lightsaber to protect her back and flanks. Allana could have taken advantage of those flaws and maybe even won if she were as young as Serissa, still in her physical prime, but instead she was battling a Force-strong athletic woman one-third her age and it was a struggle just to block every attack.

Marin and Vitor sensed her tiring. Serissa sensed it too. She focused on attacking the older woman while still defending against the others. She knocked Allana back several steps. Allana stumbled on one of the chopped-open corpse and lost balance; one arm flailed out for balance, taking her saber with it and leaving herself open.

Serissa spun one blade toward Allana's chest but Marin threw herself into the other's rotation. Red light grinded against red *beskar* but didn't cut through. Marin thrust her gold saber at the Sith's head and Serissa's whole upper body bent back to evade. The tip of the blade hissed a burnt scar across her lower jaw, but Serissa twisted her hips and snapped a backward kick that took Marin in the stomach and launched her into the railing so hard she tipped backward. She was barely able to call on the Force in time to grab the catwalk's edge with one hand while the other still grasped her lightsaber.

Allana found her balance and saw her opening, but Vitor saw one too and he was closer. He lunged, letting his blade sizzle against the underside of hers. Serissa, still tipped off-balance from the kick she'd given Marin, adjusted her stance and stepped back. Vitor pushed forward, overextending, leaving his right forearm open for a cutting blow.

Serissa didn't take the bait. Instead of crashing her lightsaber into his cortosis buckler she snapped a kick into his stomach, staggered him, and sliced downward. The emitter piece from his lightsaber vanished in a flower of sparks and he dropped the dead weapon, helpless.

Allana was there. She fought back Serissa's first blow, then another. The Sith spun and struck for Allana's face. She blocked the red blade and pushed back. Serissa reversed her spin, dropped to a crouch, and struck low, too fast for Allana to fully withdraw. She felt

the red blade slice across the inside of her thigh, tearing vital muscle. The leg collapsed beneath her and Allana hit the walkway hard.

Serissa still attacked, a series of spinning swipes from the left, right, left again. The fall had loosed Allana's grip on her lightsaber and Serissa's fourth blow knocked it from her hand and sent its cylinder skidding away across the walkway.

The Sith dropped back a half-step, straightened her grip, then lunged forward to spear Allana through the heart.

Vitor knew exactly when the moment came. He watched Allana collapse, watched repeated red saber-blows knock the weapon from her one-handed grip, and when Serissa tilted backward to prepare the killing blow he knew what he needed to do.

And he realized that if he hadn't been prepared for it, he wouldn't have done it. Surprise or mortal fear would have stolen the vital second him. But no, the Force had sent him that dream, that damned vision, and it hadn't been a curse or a cruel trick.

It had been a gift all this time.

He threw himself in front of Allana and felt the red Sith blade slide through his chest, right beneath the sternum, tearing stomach and lungs, just missing the spine as it tore out his back. Pain spread across his body, overwhelming pain that would have dropped him, but he'd known that was coming too.

The Force had put him here and the Force gave him strength. Instead of collapsing he reached both hands out and grabbed Serissa by the wrists. She tried to pull her blade out, pull herself away, but Vitor wouldn't let her go.

As he held Serissa close he stared into that face, the exact face from his vision, beautiful and twisted in a wrathful snarl. And over her shoulder: Marin, back on the walkway and on her feet, saber in hand, face slack with shock.

When it happened, she couldn't move. It was everything she'd dreaded, everything she'd sworn to herself and Vitor she'd never allow. The whole universe seemed to freeze, locking that tableau

into place: Serissa with one red blade spearing through Vitor's chest and out through his back. Vitor reached out with dying strength to grab her wrists in an iron vice. She tried to pull away, to free her hands and free her weapon, but Vitor pulled her close until the emitter of her lightsaber nearly touched his chest.

It was the perfect opportunity to cut her down. Maybe the only opportunity they'd get.

Marin knew, and she still didn't move, because her heart had already turned black with vengeance. She didn't want to cut Serissa down, she wanted to take all the rage inside her—rage for the Sith witch, for Mandalorian murderers, for herself—and burn Serissa with it.

She wanted to with all her heart, just like she'd wanted to kill Kaynar Auchs.

Shock, rage, and doubt all went through her in fast succession. Together they lasted all of two seconds. In that time Allana pushed herself to her feet, using the Force to propel her where her torn muscles wouldn't. Her lightsaber flew to her hand, ignited, and she fell on Serissa from the side. The dark queen saw it coming but Vitor's grip held her in place. As her red blade impaled Vitor, the light queen's impaled Serissa. It went in beneath her raised arm, through ribcage and lung and heart and lung again and finally came out the other side.

Serissa's sneering face went slack. Her shoulders wilted. Her grip on the lightsaber released and both blades shrunk down to nothing. Only then did Vitor let go of her. She fell to her side, landed on her shoulder, and went limp with her head and long hair dangling off the edge of the walkway.

Vitor fell too. He dropped to his knees, then bent backward, as though to show his smoking chest-wound to the sky.

Marin moved, finally. She scrambled over Serissa's body, dropped beside Vitor's, and took him in her arms. It was all she could do, and all she ever could have done.

Roan had almost reached the hangar when agony spread out from his chest. He cried, stumbled, and fell to his knees in the middle of

the hallway. Elliah and Nat immediately dropped down beside him and the Jedi asked, "What happened? What's wrong?"

Roan didn't know. He gathered his thoughts and reached out with the Force, dreading what he might find. The pain in his chest was already dwindling but it wasn't his pain. It was Vitor's.

The realization nearly made him collapse entirely. His brother wasn't dead, but his presence was so faint, and fading so fast. In minutes it would be down to nothing.

"Are you hurt?" Elliah asked and put a hand on his shoulder. "Can you stand?"

"I... I'm..." Roan couldn't say anything. He wasn't alright. He'd never be alright again.

His father and brother both, lost in the same day. The same hour.

It was like he'd taken a mortal wound himself, and been cursed with staying alive.

"Is it your brother?" asked Nat, softly. Maybe he sensed it from Roan, maybe from his cousin.

Roan didn't speak, didn't nod affirmative, but Elliah whispered, "Oh, I'm so sorry."

He felt cut off from everything, lost in a void. He didn't try to stand. There was no reason for it. There was no reason for anything, not when everything had been stolen from him when all the fighting should have been over.

Then heard the sound of laserfire, and the hum and crash of lightsabers.

He remembered the angry determination that had impelled him to chase that last Sith in the first place. It came back stronger than ever and pulled him to his feet. He could see the warning in Nat's eyes; the Jedi had a dim view of revenge. His mother, too, had taught that it was a gateway to the Force's seductive, ruinous Dark Side.

Maybe his mother was thinking differently now. As for Roan, he no longer cared.

Without a word to Nat or Elliah, he shoved past them and broke into a sprint. The battle sounded seconds away.

\* \* \*

Darth Kroan wasn't surprised to find four women guarding *Intruder*. The way his luck had been going since coming to Hapes he'd expected worse.

No, not since Hapes. Since Kovix-589. Since Orelon. Since the damned Fels had unmasked and defeated him on Balmorra eight years ago.

Just the thought of it all gave him the power of rage he'd needed. Kroan burst into the hangar with his lightsaber already blazing. *Intruder* still sat in the center and two women had dropped to their knees beneath its right wing and were spraying laserfire at him. Kroan batted their attacks easily and used the Force to locate the two remaining Hapans: one on his left flank, one on the far-right corner.

Kroan jumped sideways, an airborne spiral of ragged black robes. He came down on top of the commando there, saber through her chest. One of the women under the ship landed a lucky shot to his shoulder before he could turn around. Pain spread down his left arm but he used his right to lift his saber and artfully deflect her next shot right back at her. She dropped with a scorched hole in her face, which made the commando beside her start in surprise.

Kroan was already on his way toward her, but beyond her panic he felt something else. The fourth woman, the one in the corner, wasn't attacking but was doing something else.

Kroan cut down the third commando without stopping and raced for the corner. Standing near some cut-open portals in the closed hangar door- lightsaber work, no doubt- was one last Hapan. She had something small in her hand; a detonator. Kroan used the Force to wrench it away from her. The woman dove across the floor after it. Kroan got there first and stamped his boot down on it. A jab of his saber took her through the skull and stopped her, dead and prone at his feet.

Panting from exhaustion and his wound, Kroan picked up the detonator, looked at it once, then hurled it out the portal and into the ocean. He looked around the hangar and spotted two compact charges placed against structural pillars at the nearest two corners

of the chamber. No doubt the other two were wired to blow also. All the more reason to get out of this damned place.

He took his first step toward *Intruder* when two more figures sprinted into the room. Red armor, white blades. Imperial Knights, Davek Fel's custom-tailored personal Jedi minions. For vermin the man had ambition, and Kroan hoped Vull had made him pay for that insolence.

There was no choice but to engage them. When he got close Kroan saw they were mere *youths*, younger than the Fel prince he'd battled on *Nemesis*. They tried to take him at once, hitting both flanks. It was an amateur move and Kroan kept skirting away from their blows, forcing them to chase him and attack from the same angle. It was harder for him to attack that way and he waited for one of them to slip so he could even the numbers for this fight.

That was when three more figures rushed into the hangar: a Jedi boy with a blue saber a long blonde hair, a black-haired girl with no weapons at all, and one more Imperial Knight. Interesting pairing.

The two he was fighting swelled with confidence for the new arrivals, and that was where they slipped. When the younger one swung too high, Kroan swung low and scraped the tip of his saber across the boy's abdomen. He stumbled and fell back for the wound, probably too shallow to kill, but it would take him out of the fight.

The other Knight used the Force to push his friend away from Kroan, then stepped in front of the Sith Lord. Three against one made the odds steep, even if he was fighting children, but the Knight held off his attack as he waited for his friends to arrive. That gave Kroan the critical two seconds needed to summon all his inner rage and funnel it from his palm in a blast of Force lighting. It took the young man in the face, blinding him, and Kroan could have speared him thorough the gut right there, but the newcomers were almost on him so he side-kicked the Knight in the stomach and sent him skidding across the deck, pivoted on one foot and blocked the first attack from the final Knight.

As their sabers crashed and sizzled, red and white, he felt the raw anger blazing from this one and looked more closely at his face.



Not just any Imperial Knight. An Imperial *prince*. From the murder in Roan Fel's eyes, the Sith Lord had a very good idea what had happened. So as the prince stared at him across the crucible of their lightsabers he drew his lips and smiled.

"What's the matter, boy?" Darth Kroan hissed, "Too weak to beat the man who killed your father?"

Roan pressed down harder but the Sith Lord skirted away just in time to avoid a side attack from Nat. Kroan danced back from them both, placing himself beneath his black ship's wing and begging them to follow.

"What do you mean?" Roan called, stalking after him. "What did you do?"

"Well, I didn't kill him myself, but I loved setting it in motion." Kroan held his lightsaber to one side, like he was inviting an attack.

It took all of Roan's self-control, and Nat's wordless plead for restraint, for him not to charge after the Sith. Maybe the Sith had arranged his father's death, maybe Kroan was playing with him, it didn't matter. The taunts only heightened the rage inside. He felt he was about to burst with it. His whole life had collapsed around him in an hour and the Sith had to pay.

Another mind tugged his, urging restraint. Treis. His friend had yearned to kill a Sith for years in revenge for his own father, but as Treis stepped beside him now Roan felt nothing but calm determination from the other Knight. He'd grown up with that wound, learned to accept it, and learned to draw strength from it without being overwhelmed by his own damage.

Not so Roan. His wounds were all too raw.

"I am *waiting*," Kroan cried.

They attacked as one: Nat on his left side, Treis on his right, Roan from dead center. The Sith skirted back again, forcing them to chase him and attack only when he allowed them to get close. It was infuriating but the only smart way for Kroan to fight. After they'd moved out from under the wing the Sith launched himself into a somersault that took him on top of it. Roan didn't hesitate to follow, and the second he landed her was attacked with a fistful of

lightning. It exploded in his face and knocked him onto his back; only a Force-nudge from Treis, himself now vaulting onto the wing, kept him from falling off.

Roan struggled upright as Kroan battled Nat and Treis. As he jumped to his feet, he saw Nat step close enough to knock Kroan's lightsaber downward with his own two-handed blow. Treis stepped in on Kroan's right-hand side as the Sith twisted his saber free of Nat's. Instead of going for the killing blow as Roan would have, Treis made a downward swipe of his forearm. The cortosis buckler smashed into the red blade. Light shuddered and died in Kroan's hand and he barely recovered from shock in time to dodge Treis' next swing. With a wordless howl, Kroan hurled the useless saber into the Knight's face, then used a gust of Force energy to throw him off the back of the ship.

Roan reached out with the force to soften his friend's fall. Nat charged the Sith and brought his blade around for a decapitating arc.

Kroan stood firm. A second lightsaber appeared in his hand, red blade stretched long. Nat tried to defend himself, too late. The Sith nearly took off his hand and succeeded in cleaving the emitter from his lightsaber. Nat dropped the sparking debris and stumbled. Roan called on the Force again to hurl his cousin back, out of the way of a fatal strike. Nat slid across the ship's soft curves and tipped over the edge, and then it was just Roan and the Sith facing each other across the black.

Losing a lightsaber to damned cortosis. The Sith Lord cursed himself for it. Given that it had been affixed to the forearm of an Imperial Knight, Kroan was quite certain it had come from one of Veers' stormtroopers and that supply of ore Kroan himself had provided. He was very, very sick of irony by now.

Thankfully, the saber he'd taken from Darth Heyd's corpse back on Orelon had come in handy after all.

"Come at me, boy," he hissed to the Fel boy. "I've survived the rest of your damned family, I can outfight you."

Propelled by his own reckless anger, the prince charged across the deck. Kroan met him in a flurry of light. He could feel the boy's spite with every blow and started to wonder if *only* the father had died. He thought he'd seen the brother too, confronting Darth Saydel. He'd felt her death just before reaching the hangar; perhaps she'd taken the elder prince with her.

If he killed the last prince, the final heir, Kroan could wreak greater revenge on the Fel family than even he'd hoped for. He led the boy on, accepting his fierce attacks, waiting for his fuel of anger to run dry and for exhaustion to take him. When Roan pressed him close to the edge of the wing he began to fight back, making sharp jabs at the boy's defenses, forcing him to step back.

Then Kroan was falling, sharp pain spreading from his left shoulder. He tumbled to the hangar deck, just barely landing on his feet, and rolled before coming up again. Taking that first shot to his shoulder had been painful; this was agony, and he realized he'd taken a second laser blast in the same spot.

His head swung around and he spotted the black-haired girl pressed into a corner, on her knees, a dead commando's rifle clasped tight with both hands.

As he pushed himself to his feet, the prince dropped right in front of him. Two vertical blows knocked Kroan back to his knees and he saw the girl hefting her rifle, ready to take another shot at him the moment Fel gave her an opening.

And he saw, just a meter behind her and above her head, the tiny winking light of an explosive charge.

He dropped off his knees, onto his back, and used the Force to propel himself two meters across the deck. When his shoulders knocked into the corpse of a commando he grabbed her fallen rifle, lifted it, and fired a single shot over the girl's head.

Somehow Fel knew what he was doing. He spun around, reached out a hand, and used the Force to drag the girl away from the explosive charge right before Kroan's laser hit it. The fireball sent a shock wave across the hangar, spilled dust from the groaning ceiling and debris from the blasted-open walls. White ash filled the air, clouding everything.

Kroan pushed himself to his feet and staggered through the haze. He couldn't even hear anything for the ringing in his ears. He called on the Force to push away some of the ash and started toward the spot where *Intruder's* landing ramp would lower. As he fumbled his free hand in his robes for the controls to pull it down, two white pillars resolved out of the haze.

Lightsabers fell on him soundlessly. He grasped his own in both hands and caught their attacks. On his left, that red-armored Knight who'd already cost him one weapon. On his left, the long-haired Jedi brat with a borrowed blade. Kroan did what he'd done before, backed away and forced them to follow, but he only got a few steps before his back hit something hard, something metal. A damned landing strut.

White blades fell on him. He could barely defend both with his bad shoulder, so he called his anger and turned it into a burst of lightning that knocked the Knight back. Kroan crashed his saber into the Jedi's with a one-handed blow. The Jedi, instead of pulling his saber out from beneath, twisted his blade and the Sith's arm with it. He twisted his arm a little more, twisted it until his forearm knocked into Kroan's blade.

He didn't see the cortosis until it shorted out the lightsaber in his hand. Kroan dropped it in shock and stared at his empty hands. Then he stared at the white blade that stabbed into his chest from the right. Another blade joined it, piercing him from the left.

As pain threatened to overcome everything, even his anger, Kroan lifted his head and looked at his killers. Two children, two *brats*, neither of them even a prince. A young Imperial Knight and a young Jedi, scions of a splintered union, now come together in battle to plunge their blades into a Sith Lord. It was sickeningly poetic.

They pulled their lightsabers out of him as one. Kroan lost the strength to raise his head. His vision grew darker. He tipped forward and felt the pain of his forehead cracking against the hangar deck but it was a distant kind of pain, like he was already being dragged from his body. Everything felt distant, even all the ambitions and vanity that had driven him here. He wondered why

they'd compelled him at all. As Kroan faded into nothing his only certainty was that while he hated irony, poetry was worse.

By the time their hearing started to come back, they'd made sense of most of it. The explosion Kroan had triggered had destroyed one support pillar and partially collapsed the roof. The rest of the hangar stood intact, but coated by dust and debris.

Roan had pulled Elliah away just in time to save her life. The blast had still knocked both of them unconscious, but Treis and Nat had taken Kroan before he could escape and ended him together. When they explained this, Roan looked at them both and saw the same tired satisfaction. Nat Skywalker, good Jedi of the noble line, had taken no pleasure in killing the Sith Lord, but he was relieved the battle was finally done. As for Treis, the look in his eyes was peaceful. It told Roan he'd had no rage or vengeance in his heart when he'd driven in the blade. Roan knew he wouldn't have managed the same himself. He could only be grateful to his friend for taking the burden from him.

Elliah had been closest to the blast and woke from it after Roan did. They sat amidst the dust and debris of the hangar, too weak to stand and looking up at the others. Mohrgan leaned his wounded body against Treis and Nat handed the youngest Knight his lightsaber back.

It was tired, well-earned satisfaction for all of them except Roan. None of them mentioned his father and brother, not even to console, but he could tell they were all struggling for words.

When Elliah tried her voice for the first time she said creakingly, "Thank you, Roan. You saved me, didn't you?"

"You'd just saved *me*."

"I just... had to help."

"I know. Thank you."

When he thought back to the seconds before the blast he remembered them clearly. He remembered Kroan pushing himself away and grabbing the dead woman's rifle. Realization had come to him in a second and he'd been faced with a choice: run Kroan

through with his saber while he still held the rifle, avenging his father and Vitor, or use the Force to pull Elliah from the blast.

Roan hadn't even thought about it. He'd simply done it. If he *had* thought about it, revenge might have won out. Instinct had saved him from his own darker urges. He was glad for that. Too many good people had already died.

He saw another question in her eyes, the real one. Elliah said, "Is it true? Your father and your brother... both?"

He felt Treis, Mohrgan, and Nat staring at him too. Roan looked down and croaked, "Yes. They're dead."

Grim silence. Elliah filled it again. "I'm sorry, but... I still don't know how your Empire works, but if your father's dead, and now your brother... Does that mean *you're* Emperor now?"

"Oh," Roan gasped. In his grief and anger, the painful immediacy of loss, the thought had never occurred to him. Now, in the stillness and silence, he felt himself sink into the fullness of his new reality and all he could say was, "Oh."

Vitor didn't even notice it until he was on his back, facing the atrium's high and distant dome. The colors on its artful glass had grown deeper, brighter. The clouds over the Fountain Palace must have finally drawn away. The rainbow glow surrounding him had started from a blue, blue sky.

The light from high above beckoned, but everything around him was growing dark. He knew Marin and Allana were kneeling beside him; one of them was resting his head in her lap. Hands brushed his face but he could barely feel them. It was like a memory of touch. One dark shadow hung close, halfway obscuring the beautiful light.

He tried to lift one hand to touch the shadow. Both women jerked back; they'd thought he was already dead. He must have been so faint.

Someone took his hand and squeezed it. He felt Marin's touch in the Force but not its pressure on his hand. He didn't even feel the pain from his wound. He felt like he'd already left it all behind: the

body, the anxiety and dread, the future and the past. He'd never known freedom like this.

It wasn't for Marin and Allana, not yet. He tried to squeeze Marin's hand back. He couldn't tell if it worked.

The world had lost all detail. Shapes were shadows; everything else was rainbow light that grew brighter and brighter, like he was being drawn to its source. Though Marin's shape hung above him it seemed to dissolve before his eyes like mist. She seemed to be fading away, just like he was fading away before them, but he knew neither of them were really dissolving. They were parting, and only that.

He tried to move his lips and tell Marin something while he could. He tried to say *Don't regret this*.

Maybe he said it, maybe not. Her shadow faded, washed clear by waiting brilliance. Rainbow light surrounded him, drew him in, and Vitor was lifted high past the plane where he'd laid, shedding senses, thoughts, and crude matter until light was all.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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Hapes was a sphere of greens and blues warmed by its distant sun. From orbit its daylit side bled a corona into the blackness of space, as though life from the planet could enrich the void. To Marasiah there seemed something bitterly mocking about it, yet her eyes were drawn to it nonetheless.

This warm life-giving world, finally liberated from the Sith after forty years, would forever be the place where she'd lost her husband and son.

She'd felt Vitor's death through the Force. She hadn't been told about Davek's until later but somehow she'd known even before Jaeger haltingly delivered the blow. It was like receiving a mortal wound and being condemned to live with it, and she knew she *had* to live with it. For Vitor and Davek's memories. For the Empire they'd built. Most of all for Roan.

She'd always been a soldier. Even after becoming a Jedi, then First Knight and Empress, she'd tried to retain the soldier's virtues of discipline and service and instill them in her sons. She wondered now, in weak moment, whether she'd trained them too well, but she couldn't allow herself to dwell on that. Discipline and service. They were her last defense against overwhelming loss.



For that reason she'd insisted on personally overseeing the post-battle cleanup, even though Jaeger and Briggs had repeatedly offered to handle it. As she stood in *Invincible's* private briefing room, looking down on the planet, she listened to Briggs' latest update on the super star destroyer's status. She tried to concentrate on his words, even as Hapes kept drawing her attention.

"All things considered, Majesty, this ship did very well," Briggs told her. "We took damage and lost crew, but the Hapans mostly avoided direct engagement with it. As for our *other* ships..."

"I know, General." Losses were heavy, nearing thirty percent. The Empire hadn't seen a battle that bloody since they'd ousted Veers from Entralla four years back.

"Losses were comparatively lighter for our ground troops. As you know, the defenses around the Chume'Dan were comparatively light."

"Yes. I know." She could hear the hesitation in his every word, and worse, feel his guilt in the Force. Briggs had been right beside Davek when he died and he'd probably never forgive himself for not acting faster. She did what she could for him. "General, I want you to know you've acted commendably on this campaign. You turned *Invincible* into a fighting force faster than anyone else could have. Even at the worst moment of crisis you acted swiftly, carried out my husband's final orders, and forced the Hapans to sue for peace. I'll make sure you get the honors you deserve for this."

He swallowed. "Thank you, Majesty."

"And I know... There was nothing you could have done to save Davek."

"Thank you, Majesty," he said again.

She hoped he'd come to believe that in time. She hoped she could too.

The grim silence was interrupted by the chime from the door. Even before it opened, Marasiah knew who it would be.

"Thank you, General," she told Briggs. "You can go now, and tell my guests to come."

"Yes, Majesty."

He bowed, turned, and walked out, head slightly bowed by a weight they'd all have to carry for the rest of their lives. When Briggs left Arlen and Allana walked in, and despite the grief in their eyes Marasiah felt a little brightened.

She'd already had time to share their loss with Arlen, but this was the first she'd seen of Allana since before the battle. The Queen of Hapes, like her cousin, was dressed in dowdy Jedi robes that concealed whatever the medics on the surface had done for her leg wound. She moved with the help of a simple metal cane, which she leaned on even as she exchanged a brief embrace with Marasiah.

Then they stepped apart and faced each other, empress and queen. Allana gave her counterpart a more formal bow and said, "The people of Hapes can never repay you for that you've lost here. *I* can never repay you. Vitor saved my life."

"I know."

"You need to know that when the moment came, he didn't hesitate. If he had, even for a second. Serissa would have killed me. His bravery was... astonishing. He was an amazing Knight."

Allana only knew a part of it. When going through the things her son had brought aboard *Invincible*, Marasiah had found a trio of data-rods used for simple audio recordings. One was for her, another for Davek, the third for Roan. She'd only listened to her own, but in it Vitor had explained everything: his vision of his own death, his struggles to accept it, and the purpose he'd found after his last conversation with his grandmother. He'd recorded the messages only hours before leaving for Hapes. She could hear the tremor of fear in his voice but also the resolve to die well.

His bravery had brought her to tears. Crying alone in her cabin, she'd thought on those keystones of her life, discipline and service, and knew they alone couldn't have supplied Vitor with his valor. To face death as he had he'd drawn on an inner strength. Marasiah didn't know if she could have done the same.

"Your world is yours now," Marasiah said, looking down at the blue-green glow. "What will you do with it?"

"It's going to take time to decide," Allan said, uncertain. "The damage to Hapes itself, and our other worlds, is very minor. The

real damage is to the military. Serissa and most of her top soldiers, including Admiral Vahl, are dead."

"Serissa packed the military with her most fanatic followers," Arlen said evenly, not quite willing to admit their decimation was a good thing.

"What about the Hapan exiles?" asked Marasiah. "Where will they fit into this?"

"Most of them are eager to come home. For the young ones they'll be going to a home they've never seen, and what they've grown up with on New Hapes is very, very different from the original."

"Is it? I understand that Serissa and her fanatics cleared away the old aristocrats. We've cleared them away in turn. Your most stubborn obstacles are gone." If Arlen wasn't willing to say it, she was. "The society you're left with is leaderless, structureless. That can be dangerous. But it can also be an opportunity to start again."

"It's all the more work to do." Allana's smile was faint, tired. "Now that Vitor and Davek are gone, what will happen to the Empire?"

It was such a broad question, begging any number of responses. "There's much to consider. But just as Davek tried to preserve what he saw as his father's legacy, I will preserve Davek's."

Arlen nodded, no condemnation. "What about Roan?" Marasiah breathed in. "Roan will become Emperor."

"He's very young," said Allana.

"I know, and I'll guide him every step of the way. Davek prepared all along for his sons to succeed him. That's why he made them the face of the Imperial Knights in the public eye."

"He sculpted them to be heroes," Arlen said, with a little reproach this time.

"The Empire needs heroes. It needs strong symbols for its people to aim toward. Most of all, it needs to press ahead to the future. Because Roan is young, he can carry the Empire ahead for decades and still remain vital and strong."

"That's a very heavy burden for him," Allana warned.

"I'll help him carry it. So will all the Imperial Knights."

"It sounds like you've given this a lot of thought," said Arlen.

"I have. And it's my choice to make. The Empire needs to move forward, not look back in regret." It would be difficult. Marasiah would struggle to do it herself.

The finality in her voice made the others pensive. Allana asked, "Have you identified Davek's killers?"

That was another stab to the heart. "Yes. It was a group of Restorationists."

Allana's eyes widened in surprise. "How did they get aboard *Invincible*?"

Marasiah sighed. Briggs had pursued the investigation with a guilt-driven fervor and uncovered everything. "In the middle of the battle, *Invincible* recovered a set of escape pods from a destroyed frigate that identified itself as *Swordbearer*. That was a false ID. It was actually a Restorationist ship that escaped Kovix-589 called *Oathkeeper*. Its crew seemed to have staged the frigate's destruction with help from the Hapans so their assassins could get aboard." She added, "Based on what Roan told me, the Sith were involved in arranging it."

"Darth Kroan," Arlen supplied. "Formerly Retor of Kuhvult. If I'd killed him back on Balmorra..."

Allana put a hand on his shoulder. "Arlen, don't."

Just thinking of the man could spiral them all down into unescapable regret. Allana had consorted with Retor as Chief of State and never suspected him. Arlen had failed to kill him in battle, and so had Marasiah. Kroan had ultimately been killed not by vengeful old enemies but two young Knights, one Imperial and one Jedi, both hearts free of dark anger. There was a poetry to that, and it gave Marasiah hope for the future. Her son's generation deserved to live free of grudges and murderous spite.

She envied them. Briggs had also identified the group's leader, the one who'd fired the killing shots. Marasiah knew that Korosh Vull had been a Restorationist general and that he was unaccounted for after Kovix-589, but there had been indication he was killed in action and she'd had so many other concerns besides her former friend. She'd never thought he would have done what he'd done.

It was easy to hate Vull for what he'd become. She was glad he'd been killed on *Invincible's* bridge, because otherwise the temptation would be too strong to execute him painfully herself. Yet sometimes, as mood shifted on grief's unsteady tides, she pitied him too. The Vull she'd flown with on *Voidwalker*, the man with bravery as unquestionable as his flying skills, had been warped by time and circumstance. Those things changed everyone, and perhaps if things had been slightly different he'd have ended up another ally, like Briggs or Jaeger.

Instead his name would pass into Imperial history as a curse. So would the name *Oathkeeper*. Marasiah would see to that.

As she continued her conversation with Arlen and Allana, updating the queen on the post-battle cleanup, Marasiah considered the fate of the frigate's surviving crew. Briggs was still uncertain whether they'd all known what Vull was planning, but they'd still played a part in their Emperor's murder. Davek's policy of lenience toward minor Restorationists was completely absolved by their act of regicide. Marasiah had wavered back and forth on the fitting punishment; killing them might make them martyrs, but their prison might also become a sacred place for those lingering fanatics who dreamed of restoring Palpatine's Empire. If they were going to be executed, she'd decided to give the order herself, so that Roan might begin his reign as Empire without blood on his hand.

But as their conversation finished Arlen, somehow reading her distracted thoughts, asked, "What do you plan to do with the other Oathkeepers?"

Marasiah hated how quickly that name was gaining currency. The Voidwalkers deserved to be called after their ship, not these traitors. "They will be punished. Harshly."

She saw the concern on both their faces. Jedi moralism was a good guidepost in most cases, and apparently it had even served Allana while heading a democratic Alliance, but the Empire was a different beast. A strong boot was needed to keep its original demons down.

But Allana, very reasonably, said, "Executing them would make them heroes for anyone with Restorationist sympathies."

"I'm well aware of that, but they are accessories to regicide."

"Then try something original. Publicly condemn them. Sentence them to a lifetime of hard labor, but keep the details secret. Let no one know where they've been sent and make escape impossible."

Marasiah regarded Allana anew. "That's very... pragmatic." *For a Jedi*, she almost said. "I hope you use that same kind of wisdom when rebuilding Hapes."

She responded with a smile that was very, very tired. "Time will tell."

After Arlen and Allana left her, Marasiah retreated to her temporary cabin aboard *Invincible*. It was Davek's, but held almost nothing of him. Returning to the family estate on Bastion, full of Davek and Vitor, would be so much harder. When she entered the room, her attention was immediately drawn to the two data-rods she'd left on the bed. She'd given Roan his to listen to. She'd already played hers once; she wasn't sure if she could handle it again. She hadn't known what to do with Davek's. She still didn't. It was a private message from father to son, half a conversation between two men now dead. It wasn't meant for her, but it felt like her last precious bridge to them both.

Desire overcame her. She placed the data rod in a player, sat down on the bed, and listened. It was her son's voice again, his last words she'd ever hear. In the same tone, mixing fear and resolve, he explained the same things about his vision, his doubts, and his final choice.

The end was different and personalized. Marasiah leaned forward, hands clasped together, head bowed. She listened but didn't cry this time as Vitor said, "I know you've always hoped I'd become Emperor after you. I appreciate that, Father, because it's molded me into a better man. Without that I could never do what I'm about to do. But ruling's not my destiny. That's Roan's now, and I hope you and Mother guide him best you can. He's never been as sure of his place as a I was, but he has a place now. He'll rise to what's asked of him. I know that. He's your son, just like I am."

"As for me, my destiny is something else. I'm sorry I can't follow in your path but the Force made it so. I may not be a Jedi but I still follow the Force and I have to go where it guides me. So please, once I'm gone, don't act from grief or anger. Guide the Empire with the same wisdom you've always shown. Without your guiding light I could have never come as far as I have."

His voice faltered a little more at the end, but recovered. "So thank you, Father. You have my gratitude and my love. Whatever challenges you face ahead, take them on bravely, like you always have. I know that once you do, things will work out the way they should.

"I love you, Father. Goodbye."

When it was over Marasiah remained on the bed, not even thinking, just existing in the silence and dark. When she finally rose she took both data-rods, considered them, then found a small container and sealed it tight. She didn't want to throw them away, but didn't want to the temptation to replay them. As Vitor had said, she needed to move forward and do it bravely. She would remember, but move forward. For both of them.

Healing was going to take time. Jade was not the only Jedi who'd suffered grievous injuries on the battle at Shedu Maad. The sick bay aboard the *Por Dun* was full of them. Even Grand Master Lowbacca was strapped in a bed and sedated while confused Imperial medics tried to treat the Wookiee. Jade, whose bed was on the opposite wall of the same room, got some amusement from their fluster. It wasn't much, but she needed some mirth.

The injured were the fortunate ones. The victory had cost the Jedi dearly. Over sixty Knights and Master had been killed. Darth Wyyrlok's dying explosion had rocked the whole Sith Temple marked the end of the fight. By then all of Darth Krayt's minions were finally dead. Only the children had been salvaged.

Jade didn't remember being taken aboard the star destroyer, though Arlen had said the Imperials launched rescue teams as soon as they destroyed the Battle Dragon in orbit. The last thing she recalled before her sick bed was reaching out to touch Wharn's

fingertips before Arlen carried her away. It was the last thing she had left of him, and she tried to cling to it.

Her wounds weren't as bad as some. Her skin all over was pocked by burn scars from Wyyrlok's lightning but once bacta became available that would heal. The Sith's blade had nearly sheared her leg in two and cut through the thigh bone entirely. The *Por Dun*'s medics had cut open the leg, affixed a metal brace to bind the bone, then patched up muscle and skin. They'd seemed glad for a straightforward procedure on familiar human physiology.

All that was left was for the muscles to mend, which still necessitated her staying aboard the *Por Dun* with the other injured Jedi. She'd heard that the star destroyer had left the Maad system for Hapes but was surprised when Tanith Zel appeared beside her bed.

The Hapan woman had been through a lot too. She had one arm in the sling and walked with a careful hobble indicating a sprain rather than a broken leg. Jade had already gotten an explanation of the fight to retake Hapes but listened to Tanith tell her own version.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to help take down Serissa," she said. "I was... so close."

Jade told her, "You were lucky to survive a fight with a Sith at all."

"Allana couldn't have done it if it weren't got Vitor Fel. Did you know him well?"

"Not nearly as well as I should have."

"I'm sorry. Liberating Hapes cost everyone so much. We can never repay the Jedi and the Empire for what they've done for us."

"What do you think you'll do now?"

It was too broad a question. Tanith sighed heavily. "The Hapans used their entire navy to defend themselves. Now most of it's been ruined. It's going to take a long time to find people we can trust in the existing officers corps. We can use people from the exile community but they don't have experience with large-scale military operations. And we'll have to reform the bureaucracy too..."



She trailed off, lost in political convolutions. She seemed very much like Allana then, Allana who'd always been torn by so many great and competing responsibilities.

"What about your family?" Jade asked. "Your husband? Your son?"

The other woman blinked. "We'll be moving to Hapes, of course. My husband... he thinks he wants to help."

"Let him help. Let him *lead*, if he wants to."

"Perhaps that will be allowed." Tanith smiled tightly. "I'm hoping those of us from New Hapes can make the original newer too."

It had been half a lifetime since Allana had stood in the royal audience chamber of the Fountain Palace. She was surprised by how little had changed, once you peeled away the martial black banners Serissa had draped over the marble walls. The emerald-stone throne was the same. As she stood before it, Allana could remember being beside her mother as Tenel Ka held court, surrounded by hundreds of decorated nobles feigning admiration while devising schemes large and small for personal advancement.

Her mother was gone now, and so were the nobles. As she stood on the throne's dais and looked out at that great and empty hall, Allana felt small and alone.

"This could be a grand place again," said a voice behind her. "We'll fill it for your coronation ceremony. We'll have to show that Hapes is now a part of the galaxy again. Invite people from the Empire and the Jedi, of course. The Alliance too, for all the help they've given us. We should keep good relations with them, though I wouldn't rush to rejoin."

Allana looked back to see the only other person in the room. Tanith stood with one arm in a sling, free hand braced but still reverent against the throne's armrest. "You sound like you're planning for the future."

"Always," Tanith said.

A smile crinkled Allana's features. "I was hoping you'd say that."

She looked down at the emerald throne. She'd never coveted it; not when it had been her mother's to sit in, nor when Demia and

Serissa had claimed it. When she was young, she'd sometimes dreamed of what she'd do when she'd do with queenly powers, but dreams had always been tempered with knowledge of her mother's burden.

She'd fought to liberate Hapes from Serissa because it was her duty, as a Jedi and rightful queen, to save her people from the Sith. She'd never savored the prospect of ruling, and she'd thought long and hard about what to do once she retook the throne. She'd also thought about whether she belonged on the throne at all.

In the end she'd been decided by something Marasiah had told her. People of their generation already had already played their part in building the future. If great changes were to be designed and carried out, it deserved to be done by people with the time and vigor to do so. People of their generation still had a critical role- as guides and teachers- but the future needed to be decided by those who'd live it.

"Tanith, I've come to a decision."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"I will *not* be reclaiming this throne."

Tanith stared. "Majesty?"

"I won't be your majesty anymore. Hapes has changed too much. We haven't done all this just to create a new generation of queens and scheming nobles. This is an opportunity, Tanith, and it's been paid for by too much blood. We can't afford to waste it. It would disrespect Vitor, Davek, and everyone else who died."

Tanith didn't look surprised, just curious. "What would you do?"

"We can make *this* Hapes our New Hapes. It won't be an aristocracy and it won't be a dictatorship. We can make it into a Hapan republic where anyone- women or man, from any social class- can achieve a position of influence."

"That is.... possible. But difficult."

"I was Chief of State for the entire Galactic Alliance. I know how difficult and messy democracy can be. Compared to managing that, the Hapes Cluster is simple."

"So is *that* what you'll be? Chief of State for the Hapes Consortium?"

Allana shook her head. "No. It needs to be *you*, Tanith."

The woman's jaw finally dropped. "Majesty!"

"I am *not* your majesty or anyone else's. Not anymore."

"I... I'm not prepared for this."

"You're the most prepared person I know. You've dedicated your life to liberating Hapes, Tanith. *You* spent forty years planning for its future while I was juggling the Alliance and the Jedi. If anyone deserves to guide it into that future, it's you." Allana added with a smile, "And if you do a bad job, your citizens can always vote you out."

"To make a society like Hapes into a democracy..." Tanith shook her head. Her tone was thick with disbelief but Allana could see the thoughts behind her wide-open eyes. She was already calculating possibilities.

"Jagged Fel did it to the Empire," Allana said. "And Hapes no longer has the retrograde elements that almost undid Jag's reforms."

"One would almost thank Serissa," Tanith said sourly.

"I wouldn't go that far. But as I said, a lot of blood as been spilled to give this opportunity. We have to take it and try something new."

Tanith stared down in heavy thought. Allana waited patiently until the younger woman looked up at her. At that moment Allana could see both of Tanith's parents clearly in her face. Taryn's pragmatic guile and Zekk's righteous resolve, often so incongruous, were merged together in perfect union. She knew both of them would be proud of this moment.

"Jagged Fel didn't change the Empire alone," said Tanith. "He had help."

"You'll have mine," Allana said.

There was no way to know how many people attended the joint funeral of Davek and Vitor Fel on Bastion, but there had to be millions crammed into the arena. For Elliah Chalk, who'd known the luxury of the Fountain Palace as a child and nothing but

cramped loyalist refuges thereafter, the event had a grim grandeur unlike anything she'd experienced.

For hours, mourners from all walks of life, human and alien, came to march past their glass-case coffins as father and son laid side by side. The wounds that had taken their lives were artfully concealed. Emperor Davek Fel had been wrapped not in royal robes but in a gold-embroidered military uniform, bereft of rank. Vitor wore the red armor of an Imperial Knight. Both lay in identical poses with hands folded on their chests and eyes restfully closed.

They lay in state for an entire day, from dawn until dusk. Elliah and Hogrum watched most of it from a seat on the raised stage near the coffins where honored guests had been invited to sit. This included different Hapans and Jedi, as well as some figures from the Alliance, the Chiss, and other governments Elliah didn't recognize.

During the long procession her eyes kept being drawn to the dais at the center of the stage. Roan and his mother Marasiah were seated together on identical raised-back thrones. Unlike their dead, they'd been draped in finery that old Hapan nobles would appreciate. Their faces remained stiff masks for hours, with only their eyes showing grief behind the regal façade. Elliah knew the demands placed on them by their royal authority; for a time she'd thought the same might be placed on her as well.

Now her future was entirely open. Freedom felt like a void. From the scraps of news she'd heard, great change would be coming to Hapes and probably it would be change for the better, but she couldn't feel excited. Her return to the Fountain Palace had only reinforced her certainty that she didn't belong in her childhood home.

When the sun set and the sky over the arena darkened, the procession was cut off and the floor rearranged for a funeral pyre. Those who'd watched from the main stage had a chance to retreat from public view. For Roan and his mother it was their first time the entire day. If Roan was relieved to no longer have those eyes upon him, he didn't show. He didn't show anything, and the guests backstage gave him a careful berth.

Elliah found him in quiet hallway. He leaned his back against the wall, crossed his arms over his chest, and bent his head low. As Elliah soundlessly approached he lifted his head to look at her.

"Thanks for letting us be here," she began. They'd barely talked since the fight in the Fountain Palace.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

"They're not going to crown you Emperor tonight, are they?"

"No. That's a few days away. Will you go back to Hapes after this?"

"I don't know." She crossed her arms and lowered her head, mirroring Roan's position. "I already went back once. It wasn't... what I wanted."

"Allana and the exiles are going to change things."

"I know. But the changes don't sound like they'd have a place for a dead queen's distant cousins."

"They won't hold your relative against you, not after the help you've given."

"I know," she sighed. "They're good changes. But I'm not sure I want to stay on Hapes."

"Where would you go?"

Elliah wanted to think she'd heard faint hope in his voice. "Hogrum and I have a talent. I never realized how powerful the Force could be until I saw you all in action. I want to see if I can learn even some of that, if I can use my talents for real good."

"You should learn." After a pause he added, "I'm sure the Jedi would teach you if you asked."

"I've thought about that. I also thought about the Imperial Knights. I haven't had much experience with either group, but your Knights seem..." She trailed off. He waited, without prodding, until she said, "You have a strong sense of discipline. You serve a more purpose that's less abstract than the Jedi's. I like that. It's closer to the society I'm used to, but without many of its problems."

"Are you saying you want to be an Imperial Knight?"

She took a breath. "I think I'd like to try."

Roan thought a moment, then asked, "Have you talked to Hogrum about this?"

"I did. He'd like to try also."

"I'll see what arrangements I can make. My mother is still First Knight. She'll want to talk to you about it."

"That's good."

Roan remained with his arms bent and head low. Elliah didn't know how much longer they had until they cast his father and brother to the flames. It couldn't be that much longer.

"Can you tell me what you're feeling?" she asked.

She waited. Eventually, head still hung low, Roan said, "Until a few days ago I never knew what my future would be. Now everything is decided, for the rest of my life."

"I know. But you don't have to face it alone."

He didn't lift his head and didn't respond, but she knew he felt a little consoled. It must have come through the Force, because she could also tell that he wanted to be alone for a little while before they lit the pyres. Elliah pushed her shoulders off the wall, but before leaving she bent in and kissed him once on the cheek. What she felt in the Force was reply enough. She turned and walked out of the hallway, leaving him alone but knowing they'd talk again.

Shortly thereafter they took to the stage again. The arena was packed with silent millions and on the floor two bodies sat on unlit pyres beneath a starry sky. Marasiah carried a torch to her husband. Roan took one to his brother's. Together, with the eyes of the galaxy on them, the empress and her son lit two flames that burned fast and tall and bright. Smoke rose invisibly into the night, carrying the ash of two lives. The essence of them, Elliah knew, remained in the hearts of all who watched.

Marin had never felt at home on Ossus, not really, but she'd never felt like a total stranger until coming back from the ceremony on Bastion. The feeling of alienation had been strong and immediate, but it only gave confirmation to feelings that had been growing inside her, not just since Vitor's death but Ninet's.

When she sat down with her father in his quarters, she told him what she'd decided. She begun with what she should have told him before events had swept them apart. She told him about Ninet and

Dorn, and what she'd done on Loracan. She told him about Vitor, and what she'd done and failed to do. She told him about Vitor's last words, not spoken but sent clear through the Force even as he faded. *Don't regret this.* It was the hardest thing he'd ever asked of her, and she told her father what she'd need to do first.

She'd expected him to argue or at least raise strong objections, but he listened to her words in calm and mournful silence. When she was done Arlen asked, "Where do you think you'll go now?"

She was bent forward in her chair with her lightsaber in both hands. "I'm working in that. The nice thing about spending a couple years in the Outer Rim is I've made a lot of connections. Some of them don't even know I'm a Jedi." She paused. "*Was* a Jedi. That's going to be hard to get used to."

"You don't have to leave the Order, not officially. If you want to take some time alone to find your place in it, or apart from it, I'm sure Lowbacca will understand."

She shook her head. "No. I can't be tentative with this. I went after Kaynar Auchs telling myself I could just put that Jedi part of me aside, for a time. What I ended up doing was so much worse. I have to sever my ties entirely."

"Not entirely." Arlen reached out and put a hand on hers. "*Never* entirely."

"I'm not going to hide. I'll stay in touch with you, and Mom. But I won't go to Mandalore either. I belong there even less. I'll find some place new. Like I said, I've made connections. You know, growing up I spent too much time among Jedi here and on Bastion. It wasn't until I left that I realized there's trillions of beings out there who don't have the Force at all. They live their lives without having the weight of the galaxy dropped on them or being torn apart by different cultures. Most of them seem to do just fine with that kind of life."

"Is that the kind you want? Where you don't use the Force at all? Do you really think it will be better than the life you have now?"

"Dad..."

"I'm not arguing. I just want to know."

"I think I have to find out. And to do that I have to commit myself."

"What about this?" He shifted a hand to her lightsaber.

"I'll leave it behind. As a donation."

Arlen thought a moment, then understood. He drew his hands back. "You'll let me know where you end up."

"Of course. And I'll let Mom know too."

"Will you go there first?"

"Yeah. I need to explain this in-person."

"And then?"

"I don't know exactly." She leaned back and looked to the ceiling. Getting this out made her feel light, directionless but free. The smile that came to her was sad but sweet. "It's a huge, huge galaxy out there. I think I need to explore for a while."

She left her father, taking her lightsaber with her. She started down the hall out didn't get far. Nat Skywalker was waiting there, leaning against one wall.

"Looking for someone?" Marin asked.

"I could tell you were meeting with your dad."

"Eavesdropping, are we?"

The apprentice shook his head. "I went there to talk to him, but I... felt both of you. I didn't hear anything."

"Did you feel anything else?"

"I'm not sure." Nat eyes her hesitantly. They'd barely spoken since Hapes. He'd comported himself well but the serious injuries to his mother, combined with Vitor's death, had rattled him. He was as talented an apprentice and Marin had ever met, but Hapes had been his first encounter with the Dark Side at its worst.

What she had to do next wouldn't help, but it had to be done. "Nat, I'm going to be leaving. Soon."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not exactly sure. But I have to go."

He frowned, confused. "Did something happen with Arlen?"

She smiled faintly. "That's *Master* Arlen to you. But no, it's not about him. You've got a great Master and he's got a lot more to teach you. I have to leave Ossus, Nat. I'm leading the Jedi Order."



He'd sensed her discomfort for a while, but he'd not expected this. Of course he hadn't; Nat was heir to a great family, raised and trained by Jedi since childhood. Marin had been the same at first, and for her first fourteen years she'd never doubted her path either.

Nat groped for a response. "Why do you have to leave? Is this about Vitor?"

"Partially. But there's a lot more to it than that."

"Like what? And what do you think you'll do if you leave the Jedi? You're not going to Mandalore?"

"No. Like I said, I don't know where I'm going. But there's lot of possibilities. This galaxy is bigger than any of us can image, Nat."

"I don't understand." It came out like a whimper.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "You think you're a Jedi now. Maybe you always will be. Maybe not. Maybe you'll want to find another life. Just remember that when you feel trapped, Nat. You don't *have* to be a Jedi or even a Skywalker. There's always possibilities."

For a second he looked like he was going to cry, but he composed himself. "This doesn't mean we'll never see each other again, does it?"

"We can keep in touch, once I find a place to lay low. And I can still give you advice if you need it, even if I'm not a Jedi." He nodded shakily. Marin lifted the lightsaber in her free hand. "Consider this a parting gift. I heard you lost your old one. Still took down a Sith Lord, though. I guess from a Skywalker that shouldn't surprise."

Nat took the lightsaber in both hands. He ran his fingers over its unfamiliar surface and Marin stepped back so he could thumb the switch and extend its blazing gold blade.

"You look good with it," Marin said. He really did.

Nat shut it off but still grasped it tight. "Thank you. I'll never forget this. Or you."

"You'd better not." She gave him a slap on the shoulder, playful. His eyes were still sad but she gave an honest smile. "I'll see you around, Nat. May the Force be with you."

Nat opened his mouth to return her salute, then reconsidered. "Good luck."

"Luck's good too," Marin said, patted his shoulder once more, then walked past without looking back. Every step felt long and light. There was so much behind her that would always weigh her down, but at least she could keep walking.

Ossus was rarely a charming planet world, but sundown was the exception. The sun smoldering on the horizon turned the sky interesting shades of red and gold, and though it was cloudless and blank it was nonetheless textured by the Cron Drift's colorful stardust that seemed to grow brighter as night encroached. At the same time the desert and mountains surrounding the Jedi Temple were dyed the same red and gold as the sky. Two moons, so pale as to look spectral, were slowly rising in the sky. Once night fell and they crawled upward they'd look down on the Temple like a pair of eyes glowing out of the Cron Drift's face.

"I always remembered nights like this," Jade told Arlen as they sat side-by-side on the edge of a balcony near the top of the Temple pyramid. "The way those two moons lit up the sky... It was always special. For a long time they made me think of Mom."

Arlen knew why. The sky had looked like that the night Jade's mother had been killed by Darth Xoran during the Sith coup on Hapes. That had been nearly four decades back. Now both moons were out again, for the first time since Hapes' liberation.

"Nowadays," Jade continued slowly, thoughtfully, "They mostly make me think about Jodram, and the times we went out together to mediate under the moons. But I remember this one night, maybe his very first night here, we took Wharn out under the moons too."

She'd only ever called him *Wharn* since he'd died. Arlen didn't know if that was fully earned. At the end of it all, the Chiss had been irreparably changed from the anxious, eager teenager whose Jedi training Arlen had begun. Yet for all the damage the Sith had done to him, he hadn't been their creature. He'd not died as Darth Terrid and that, Arlen supposed, counted as a victory against the dark.

More quietly, almost as a whisper, Jade said, "I think I knew he'd been important, even then. He was unique from the start, and you just thought he'd accomplish so much... more than what he did."

"He allowed us to destroy Darth Krayt, finally. And you and Jodram might not have been able to kill Abeloth without him." Arlen considered, then added, "Whatever he was in the end, he accomplished more to fight the dark than almost any other Jedi. Maybe, in its own way, the Force itself was working through him the whole time. When you took the help he offered, whatever his motives, you were accepting the will of the Force and moving the rest of the Jedi with it."

It was a big idea, something he'd never articulated before, even to himself. He expected Jade to object, or ponder it for a long time in silence, but instead she tilted her head back and shook with a dry laugh.

"What's so funny?"

She smiled at the sky. "That's basically what your mom said to me on Zonama Sekot."

"Well. She was always wiser than the rest of us." For Jaina, he knew, all wisdom had come hard-earned.

Jade dropped her head. "She's not really gone, you know."

"I know."

They heard a sound below them: the warming of thrust engines. Jade tilted her head quizzically but Arlen knew what it was. He felt his daughter reach out to touch him in the Force, a short farewell, before the engines roared loud and a battered old X-wing leaped out from the Temple hangar and soared to a darkening sky.

Jade and Arlen watched her four thrust-trails dwindle to one faint light, indistinguishable against the brightening stars. "Nat said she gave him her lightsaber," Jade said.

"It's a good blade."

"So she really means it. She's not coming back."

"No. I don't think she is."

Night settled around them in silence. Eventually Jade said, "You're taking it better than I thought."

"I never wanted this, but Marin does. And I think, for her sake, it's probably the right choice. There's so many possibilities out there for a life that doesn't demand she be a Jedi, or a Mandalorian, or a Fel, or the scion of a Skywalker."

Jade made a faint, wistful hum. Arlen glanced at her to see her still watching the rising moons. He knew Jade had never desired the heavy duties and destinies of Ben, Luke, and Anakin. Destiny had found her anyway, again and again. Wharn had always dragged her into it, or maybe it was the reverse. Now that his destiny was ended perhaps Jade's was too, and she could have the peace she desired as she continued to guide Nat and Kol.

And when they grew, destiny would probably find them too, and they'd have to deal with it in their own ways. That was something that could only be revealed in the fullness of time.

"Hey Arlen," Jade said, "You're having some grandiose thoughts, aren't you?"

"Possibly."

Jade breathed deep of the dry, cooling air and carefully pulled her legs on the balcony's stone edge. She shifted to sit in a cross-legged meditation pose and said, "We should clear our heads."

"Here?"

"Yours doesn't need clearing?"

When he didn't deny it she looked up at the sky again. Red and gold were fading to violet and would soon turn black. The moons had turned from specters to luminous discs that would only glow bright as they reached the apex of the sky. Nights like these didn't come often, but they were always special.

"Okay, I could stand a little meditation," Arlen agreed and shifted his legs. "A night like this, just us and the universe. Sounds like sounds good to me."

Darth Ruyn had never been here before, but it still felt like a homecoming. Every One Sith on Shedu Maad had been trained in their order's ancient lore and all of them had ached to one day see Korriban. Darth Wyyrlok had forbidden their coming here, on the

belief that the Jedi, knowing of the One Sith's existence, would have watchers on the place at all times.

None had been detected when the ship from Shedu Maad had exited hyperspace over the dark, seemingly lifeless world. They fell down into the atmosphere and settled within the Valley of the Dark Lords, where stone ruins remained majestic and fearsome even in their decay. As Ruyn stepped out of the ship and into the Valley he tilted his head back and stared with unashamed awe at the towering statues of Sith Lords thousands of years dead. Each monument had endured the grind of millennia and the predations of the Jedi to proclaim the power and majesty of the Lord entombed within. The thought of one day leaving his own mark on the galaxy and earning such a memorial for himself was intoxicating.

"Do not fall victim to your vanities, Lord Ruyn," said a voice behind him, rasping but firm. "Always remember. We are *One* Sith."

The Twi'lek stiffened and turned to see the other Sith who'd escaped Shedu Maad descend the landing ramp. At the heart of them was a figure taller and broader than the rest. While the others wore black robes, his body was encased in jagged, organic Yuuzhan Vong armor that had been grafted into it nearly a century ago and taken root. A fearsome horned mask covered all of his face except for his tattooed lower jaw and glow of his eyes: one golden-red, the other icy blue.

The other Sith cleared the way so Darth Krayt could step into the Valley. The Dark Lord of the Sith closed his eyes and breathed deep, savoring the acrid air. More, he savored the dark energies that seemed to emanate from every tomb. Even in death, the power of these ancient Lords lingered on. They filled the air like invisible miasma. Just being here was intoxicating; Ruyn felt like this was the moment he'd been waiting for all his life.

Then Krayt said, "Come. Follow me."

The Dark Lord led the way. The other Sith followed him deeper into the Valley. The chasm grew increasingly narrow and the ancient ruins loomed higher. The crumbling stone faces of the ancient Sith seemed to leer down at them in judgement.

Darth Krayt had spent many years on Korriban. For a time he'd even slept here, until the attention of the Jedi had caused him to seek another shelter for the One Sith. Best Ruyn knew, he'd been in stasis since arriving on Shedua Maad, directing Darth Wyyrlok through his dreams. Those dreams had allowed him to see the coming of the Jedi to Shedua Maad and prepare. Ruyn had been surprised when Darth Kheykid gave him the order. He'd thought, with arrogance plain in retrospect, that the Sith stronghold could withstand a Jedi assault, especially with the aid of the Hapans.

He had been wrong. He'd felt his comrades die from across the stars, one after another. All of the Sith had recoiled in shock and agony except for Krayt himself, who'd spent most of the flight to Korriban locked in solitary meditation, funneling his strength into Wyyrlok across lightyears so she could make a convincing end of it.

Krayt led them through ancient ruins like a man walking casually into his quarters. Lighting cracked overhead and thunder rolled, but the Dark Lord paid it no heed. He marched them to the base of a tomb whose statue had cracked at the base and jutted diagonally outward. It seemed on the verge of tipping but likely hadn't budged in millennia. Krayt stood in the shadow of the tipping statue. His acolytes gathered behind him. Ruyn felt the rustling of dark energies and heard the scraping of stone over stone.

He watched as the door to the tomb slid open. Figures in dark robes emerged from the lightless catacomb. There were dozens of them, more than those that had escaped Shedua Maad but far less than those who'd been left behind. Darth Ruyn had never heard of this hidden Sith redoubt until Darth Kheykid told him, but here it was. They'd lost much at Shedua Maad, too much, but they would rebuild.

The figure closest to Krayt stepped forward and threw back his hood. It was a young Chagrian with a face tattooed in black and red. As he looked up at Krayt his eyes widened and his sharp-toothed jaw hinged open, like he was lost in awe.

Then he dropped to his knees and bowed. The other acolytes did the same and once on their knees they threw off their hoods.

Each of their faces was marked in black and red, the sign of those born into the One Sith.

"Lord Krayt," the young Chagrian hissed, "It is an honor to behold your majesty."

The Dark Lord looked down with a faint smile. "Greetings, Darth Wyyrlok."

Then send titters of confusion through the Sith at Krayt's back. The Dark Lord turned his horned head back at them and said, "As his grandfather and mother did before him, this Wyyrlok will serve. He will speak for me when I return to my stasis chamber."

That garnered more confusion. Ruyn held his tongue but Darth Vurik was brave enough to say, "Lord Krayt we thought that you had emerged from sleep to command our revenge against the Jedi."

"I have, but that hour is not now. We will need time to rebuild our strength and recover from our losses. But do not fear. Our victory is more assured now than ever. The Jedi believe our One Sith destroyed. They believe I am dead. Because they do not seek us, we will be more able to plant the seeds of their destruction.

"Be *patient*, my Sith. Look around you. I have selected you to join me on Korriban because you are loyal, and because you are *young*. Don't despair of seeing our design realized. Don't doom yourself with vanity and haste like Terrid and his traitors. As your Dark Lord I promise you that within thirty years we will have broken the spine of the galaxy. I have *seen* it in my dreams, and we must begin working immediately to bring it about."

"Yes, Lord Krayt!" bellowed the new Wyyrlok.

The other Sith echoed the cry and Ruyn joined in. Darth Vurik was the first in his group to drop to his knees. Ruyn followed and bowed his head in obedience. Soon the only one left standing was Darth Krayt. He looked down on his acolytes as lightning crashed overhead, as if in celebration.

Their time would come. Not yet, not soon, but it would come, and Ruyn would be there to see it. The thought made him swell with pride, but a better pride than before. This was not a lust for monuments; it was a glorying in what they would accomplish as together. Through patience, through loyalty, through self-sacrifice if

required, they would bring Lord Krayt's dream about and transform the galaxy forever.

That was why they served the Dark Side. That was why they were One Sith.



## CHAPTER FORTY

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The coronation ceremony for Emperor Roan Fel took place in the same arena where they'd memorialized his father and brother three days before. The center stage had been reconstructed as something even more grandiose, with scarlet pillars rising in tiers and a great Imperial crest, twenty meters wide, lit atop them like a crown. Posted on those high pillars were a pair of stately two-dimensional portraits bearing the faces of Jagged and Davek Fel, markedly similar for their trim black beards, dark eyes, and the stripe of white hair cutting up from the forehead. A single high-backed throne sat at the center of the stage and when the ceremony began it was empty but luminous beneath bright spotlights.

On the arena floor stood ten thousand stormtroopers, shoulder-to-shoulder in gleaming white rows. Music played, thunderous and grand. When they took two steps to either side in perfect synchronization they opened a central aisle toward the throne. The first person to step down it was Empress Dowager Marasiah Valtor Fel, cradling her husband's slim golden crown in both hands. Robes of violet shimmersilk trailed behind her, and behind the robes a line of Imperial Knights processed two-by-two

in capes and red armor. At the heart of that line and the center of the pageant, one man among millions, was the new Emperor.

Roan had known it would be like this. He'd stood by his mother's side as she'd planned the ceremony and made suggestions when needed, but his imagination had never come close to capturing the majesty of it.

The majesty was important. His mother had talked to him about symbols before the ceremony and not for the first time. His father and brother had died too soon after the completion of the Restoration war and the final unification of a battered Empire. The authority needed to secure his father's peace had to be swift, firm, and undeniable. A ceremony this grandiose, with millions crammed into the arena and trillions watching across the galaxy, would leave no doubt that the Fel dynasty would endure, and so would the path laid down by Roan's grandfather.

Other symbols were important. The Imperial Knights, in their scarlet splendor, drew the attention of everyone and left no doubt that the Force-users would be at the heart of the Empire for years to come. The deaths of Davek and Vitor were being presented to the galaxy as a tragedy, but not as a mistake. The Empire's costly actions at Hapes were being seen by much of the galaxy as an act of admirable boldness, in stark contrast to the Alliance's democratic dithering. Davek had told his people their liberation of Hapes would raise the Empire's moral leadership, and his martyrdom had sealed that. Roan would continue that, and was already planning to expand the Empire's influence in ways less costly. His grandfather had promoted a policy of victory without war, and Roan hoped he could bring it back.

There were symbols still. As Roan drew nearer to the throne he looked up at the images of Davek and Jagged. The thin scars on their foreheads and white stripes through their hair had been left by battlefield injuries, sustained but survived while young. Roan had taken his own grievous wounds, though not as visible. He'd nonetheless added a stripe of white dye through his hair. As it had been for the first two Fel Emperors, so it would be for the third.

When the Imperial Knights reached the stage they fanned out on either side. Marasiah stood before the throne, crown cupped in both hands. Roan paused for a moment at the platform steps and looked into his mother's eyes. For a moment he froze with all eyes on him, arrested by the enormity of what he was about to do.

Reigning for just eight years had taken visible toll of his father. At seventeen, Roan stood poised to rule for many decades. Power was draining. Power was tempting. He was acutely aware of the anger in his heart. The Sith had stolen his father and brother, and the desire for vengeance would never go away. The Sith had been eradicated, or so it seemed, but history showed they were like the worst pests, always hiding in the dark.

Even without the Sith, there would be other temptations. To withstand them he would need to rely on the people close to him: his mother most of all, but Treis and Mohrgan, the other Imperial Knights, hopefully Elliah as well. With them by his side the toll of ruling would be less harmful.

Roan clung to that thought and mounted the steps. The music mounted to crescendo. He stepped in front of his mother and dropped to one knee. Marasiah placed the crown gently on his head. It was thin and light but seemed to weigh so much. Yet when he felt his mother's faint touch through the Force he rose smoothly, proudly, and faced the assembled millions and the trillions watching from afar.

The Imperial Knights lined on either side of the throne ignited their pure-white lightsabers and lifted them as one. The stormtroopers pounded fists on armored chests and raised salutes. The crowd erupted in a messy chorus of adulation.

It was a moment of history defined. The new Emperor tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and let history become him.

Five days after the coronation of Emperor Roan Fel, a very different pageant took place in the grand audience chamber of the Fountain Palace on Hapes. Absent were armored guards with blazing swords, thunderous marches, and assembled rows of soldiers. The emerald throne from which hundreds of Queens had reigned was present

but conspicuously empty. A silver chord had been draped from arm to off, elegantly sealing it from use. The dais around the throne, while much humbler than the one the Imperials had used, was still packed with dignitaries. Empress Dowager Fel was among them, representing a son already busy on Bastion. From the Jedi Order, Jade Skywalker and Grand Master Lowbacca made an incongruous pair, and many in the audience- themselves selected from both genders, every planet, and all walks of Hapan society- had a hard time keeping their eyes off the mountainous Wookiee. From the Galactic Alliance, Kyrr Esch had come to represent the triumvirate.

Once the ceremony began- with the piping of a mere half-dozen horns- attention turned to the women who stepped onto the dais from either side. From the right came Tanith Zel; from the left, Allana Solo Djo. Both wore dresses elegant but not elaborate, and it was hard for the audience to miss the silver lightsaber attached to Allana's belt.

Nonetheless it was not for the former queen that they were gathered. When they converged before the empty throne, Allana placed a hand over her heart and recited the words they'd agreed upon. "I, Allana Djo, agree to formally pass that power to you, Tanith Zel, on the condition that you abide by all rules laid out in the new constitution of the Hapes Consortium. You will govern by consent of the Hapan people, for *all* Hapan people. As first President of the Consortium you will establish a Senate of the Sixty-Three Worlds and will work with its representatives to build a new future for us all. Do you swear to hold by those terms?"

Tanith exhaled, smiled, and deviated slightly from the wording agreed. "Absolutely, Your Majesty."

"Not any more," Allana whispered, smiling, and turned to the audience. "I hereby relinquish all authority passed to me by my mother Queen Tenel Ka. The Hapan monarchy is ended and the first Hapan republic has begun. I wish you the greatest fortune in determining your own fates."

The applause was instant and loud. Allana stepped away, leaving Tanith to stand alone in front of her people. When the clapping

subsided she began her inaugural speech, sticking exactly to the words she and Allana had worked out.

Allana watched from her place beside the Jedi. Some in the audience kept glancing at her as Tanith began, but two minutes into her speech all eyes were where they belonged.

Jade edged a little closer and whispered, "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Allana said, "But I'm not out of a job yet. She'll need all the help I can give her."

"Still, congratulations."

Allana nodded slightly. "Thank you for coming. I know you can't stay long."

"It's my pleasure."

"You'll be going back to Zonama Sekot?"

"Yes. I'll take Nat and we'll spend some time with Kol."

It was more than deserved. Allana knew more than anyone how important it was for family to be together when it got the chance. "How much time?"

"As long as we need," said Jade, with a tight, satisfied smile.

Allana smiled too. They watched Tanith complete her speech, landing every word, and she ended with the day's most remarkable reversal, one she had suggested and Allana enthusiastically supported. It was centuries-old custom for Hapan queens to finish their addresses by commanding everyone in the audience to bow as one. When Tanith's speech was over of the people before her looked ready to dip on one knee. Instead Tanith was the one who dropped and bowed her red head in supplication to the people.

The audience froze, shocked and dumbstruck. From the back, someone started clapping. More joined in, and soon the audience chamber rocked with it, louder than Allana had ever heard.

"It looks like you've successfully passed the torch," Jade said over the din. "How does it make you feel?"

Allana wanted to say *relieved*, but it was more than that. The loss of Hapes had cast a heavy shadow over the second half of her life; the pressure of future rule had weighed the first half. All of that was gone now, and while challenges remained- they always would- she felt a freedom unlike anything she'd known.

No, she thought, not quite. A very long time ago, when she'd been just a child, she'd escaped from the pressure of royalty and travelled the galaxy with her grandparents aboard their old, battered, extremely un-regal tramp freighter. She'd been weighed by the past then too, her father's fall and death still fresh, but the galaxy had never seemed so fresh or full of wonder as when she'd explored it with Han and Leia.

Allana leaned close to Jade and said, "Believe it or not... I feel *young*."

Sundown over the Skirata encampment at Kyrimorut was never as dramatic as sunrises, but it still had certain beauty. While the sun set unseen behind mountains in the west, the eastern sky changed smoothly from blue to gold to red to violet and finally to black. On cloudless evenings like this it was an especially impressive sight.

It was a bittersweet thing to watch sundown from the overlook where Ninet's and Dorn's helmets still rested atop waist-high stakes. Marin stood in front of Ninet's, Tamar in front of Dorn's, and neither spoke for a while. When the sky was dipping toward violet Tamar asked her daughter, "What will you do with her armor?"

Marin looked at Ninet's red helmet. "It helped me when I needed it, and I'm grateful... But I don't think I can keep it."

"You're sure?"

"I gave Nat my lightsaber. I shouldn't keep the *beskar* either. I never deserved it in the first place."

"Yes you do," Tamar said firmly. "You're a Skirata. You always were."

"Maybe. But I was never a Mando. I just pretended sometimes. The only time I really tried to be one..." Marin shook her head. "The thing is, I wasn't just play-acting as a Mando. I was playing as a Jedi too."

Tamar had tried to be a Jedi once and failed far worse than Marin had, but she didn't think her daughter would find that consolation. She'd also tried what Marin was about to do, live a life as neither Jedi nor Mando. It had been a lonely, drifting life. Tamar had come back to Clan Skirata having realized she'd never be a

perfect Mando, but a Mando was what she'd been at the start. The life she had here was good enough; not perfect, but she was too old to waste years wandering in discontent.

She tried to figure out how to explain this, to pass some critical guidance to her daughter. Eventually Tamar said, "Wherever you go, don't be alone. You said you wanted to experience the life normal beings have when they're not playing as Jedi or Mandos or heroes with crazy bloodlines. So *live* it. Find people to live it with."

Marin tilted her head up watch the darkening sky. After thinking a while she said, "I've already been to a lot of places. I know a lot of people. Some of them I think I could trust. Some of them don't know I'm a Jedi."

"Then you have a place to start."

"Maybe. A lot of them don't know me as Marin Fel. I didn't want to advertise the name and give myself away."

"Understandable."

She hugged herself against night's coming chill. "They know me as Marin *Solo*. It's pretty inconspicuous, and still in the family tradition."

Tamar smiled tightly. "I've heard your great-grandfather was quite a rogue."

"Dad bragged about it, didn't he?"

"More than once. But Arlen isn't a rogue, even if he play-acted when he was young. I don't you're a rogue either."

"Maybe not. But still... It's a good name, isn't it?"

"I approve."

"I'm glad." Marin breathed cooling air, shivered, and said, "I think I should be going."

"Do you want to say goodbye to anyone else?"

"I think I've said all I need to."

They started back through the forest, past the main settlement, toward the small landing pad on which Marin's battered X-wing rested.

"You drop the name, the lightsaber and the *beskar*, but you keep the ship," Tamar observed. "Interesting choice."

"Flying pieces of junk is also a family tradition."

"You can't trade it for something more spacious?"

"Maybe. Give me a little time."

They turned to face each other beside the X-wing. Daylight was almost gone from the sky, and stars were peeking through violet dark. Mother and daughter embraced without words, then stepped away. Marin climbed up the ladder and dropped into her cockpit. Tamar stepped back and watched as the ship rose on its repulsors, fired its engines, and soared into the sky.

Tamar remained at the empty landing pad for a while. She watched the red light of her daughter's ship until it dwindled to nothing. Then she watched the sky's pure black, and the stars that marked a billion destinations. Finally, she turned for the settlement and walked back to the place where she belonged.

When it reached the research station in Zonama Sekot's southern wastes, *Jade Shadow* settled gently onto the landing platform. Kol Skywalker was there to see the landing ramp lower and he rushed forth to greet his mother and brother.

He'd heard most of what had happened to them in the Hapes cluster. He knew his brother had killed a Sith and he knew his mother had been grievously injured taking down the dreaming Dark Lord. He'd expected them to look changed somehow, weary or harrowed, but they greeted him with earnest smiles and warm hugs. If anything they seemed lighter than when they'd left Zonama Sekot. They seemed more alive.

Master Veila was waiting on the edge of the platform, and Jade gave her a short hug as well. "I'm glad to see the research is still going on," Kol's mother said as Tahiri led them into the compound.

"The Alliance is prosecuting Rennis in full," the older woman explained. "And they've arranged to send two scientists to replace him."

"I hope these ones are... completely vetted."

"They have been. They're already working well with the shapers."

"I'm glad to hear it." Jade looked at her son. "How have you been helping, Kol?"



"I've been in the labs, a little. But less than I did before. Nei Rin's up in the Middle Distance. She said she has a lot to learn before she can really help this project."

"Nei Rin sounds wise."

Kol nodded seriously. "I've mostly been working on training down here."

"You mean you're getting instruction from Master Veila?" asked Nat.

"Partly," Kol muttered.

They gave him uncertain looks. It would be easier to actually show them, but that had to wait. Neither Jade nor Nat had actually been to this facility before and Tahiri gave them a short tour, letting them look in on laboratories used by the Alliance and Yuuzhan Vong scientists.

"Do you really think you can heal the whole continent this way?" Nat seemed skeptical.

"That's the goal," said Tahiri. "With Jedi, Yuuzhan Vong, and Alliance teams all working together, we make more progress than any of us could alone."

"It's what Aunt Jaina wanted," Kol added seriously.

"Still," said Nat, "We flew over a lot of ravaged land to get here."

"That's why it's a task that needs years and years of hard work," said Tahiri. "If this goes well we might even be able to undo some of the Yuuzhan Vong terraforming on worlds like Duros and Tynna."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." Even Jade seemed skeptical.

Kol didn't hold it against them. He had faith in the people working on this project, but as Tahiri had said, this was a long process that would take many years. Maybe it would succeed. Maybe it would fail. As he'd said, he was doing more here than just running errands in the labs.

After Tahiri completed the tour, Kol found his opening. Once she showed them the ground-level gates that let them out of the compound, Kol led his mother and brother over a few dusty ridges, taking steps as long as his eleven-year-old's legs would allow. He could feel confusion from both Nat and Jade, but he didn't have to lead them far.

Three Skywalkers stopped at a trough between two ridges. It was a place Kol has scouted a few days before their arrival, and after bending low and clearing away some of the dust with his bare hands he uncovered what he was looking for: a stout, gnarled tree-stem jutting out of parched earth.

"Something's growing in this place?" asked Nat, surprised.

"It's stubborn," Kol agreed. "There's a lot of them here. Bora from older seedings that didn't take. But they're not dead."

"It looks close," said Nat.

Jade, though, seemed to sense Kol's intention. "What do you think you can do for this?"

"Just watch," Kol said. "This is something I've been working on."

He lowered himself to the dust and sat cross-legged. Jade sat next, on the other side of the tree sprout, leaving room for Nat. Kol's brother, resigned, dropped to the ground too.

They waited, watched. Kol closed his eyes and bent forward so his cupped hands were near the bora's dried stem. He breathed in and out and found his peaceful inner core, just like Tahiri had taught him. He felt the life all around him, just like Jaina had taught. Kol felt Nat in the Force, fresh with energy and still striving outward to a goal he didn't yet know. He felt his mother as something vast and powerful but also calmed, like the ocean in clear weather.

Against those to bright, living, powerful lives, it wasn't easy to find the faint spark of the tree, but he did. And with the Force he built a bridge, from himself and his family to the tree-sprout, and through that bridge he began to pass a little power from the greater to the lesser, the mighty to the small. As he shared of himself with the bora he shared himself with his mother and his brother, and they shared with him, and three Skywalkers and one small life were linked together as one in the Force. And as they linked Kol could feel something else: the bit of his great-aunt that had been passed into him, adding its strength too.

The link didn't last long. It didn't need to. When Kol separated from the tree he separated from Jade and Nat, and all three were alone in the Force but still warmed by each other's glow. When Kol

opened his eyes he saw the bora-sprout before him, still small, humble and weak, but also enriched by a healthy green color. Two leaves had folded out from the stalk to take in the light.

It was a small thing, but it was life. It was resilient. He looked up from the tree and examined their faces. Nat's eyes were wide in wonder and surprise. Jade's smile was bittersweet with understanding. She put a hand on Kol's shoulder and said, "That was good, son. That was beautiful."

He nodded, smiling, and looked back to the fragile sprout. In drawing healing breath from his brother and mother he'd in turn been drawing it from a line of Skywalker that went generations back and would continue beyond them as well. He knew the Force called Skywalkers to different destinies which were never easy, but they always came, and Skywalkers always had to rise to them.

Kol had no idea where his would lay, but as he looked at that fleck of life in the desert he thought he understood some of it. They said Skywalkers saved the galaxy time and again, but it wasn't true, not exactly. Empires rose and fell, war gave way to peace and to war again. Generations followed generations without end. Countless beings had lived and died without knowing or caring what the Jedi did.

Yet the Jedi, and the Skywalkers most of all, had a role to play. In giving of their power and themselves they safeguarded the life of the galaxy, fragile though it sometimes was. They sacrificed. They nurtured. They kept it resilient. It was a role passed along for a thousand generations. Kol's was just one in the link, but it was his time now.

The legacy of all who'd come before was in his hands, which meant he couldn't sit here forever. Kol rose first and brushed the dusty from his pants. Jade and Nat did the same, and they looked down on the boy with new respect. The look made him flush, embarrassed, but it gave new confidence, and when he met their eyes he couldn't keep from smiling.

"Come on, let's go back." Kol said, "We've got plenty of work to do."







## About the Author

Gregory O. Scott is a pen name for fan fiction writer HandofThrawn45. When Disney rebooted the Expanded Universe in 2014, it brought about the official end of the Star Wars Legends continuity. Yet while no official Legends books have been released since the official end of the Legends line of books, not everyone has been willing to accept that it would seem. Since 2018, HandofThrawn45 has written a number of fan novels which are intended to close off the loose ends created in the wake of Disney's end of the Legends Continuity.





## About the Type

This book was set in Minion, a 1990 Adobe Originals typeface by Robert Slimbach (b. 1956). Minion is inspired by classical, old-style typefaces of the late Renaissance, a period of elegant, beautiful, and highly readable type designs. Created primarily for text setting, Minion combines the aesthetic and functional qualities that make text type highly readable with the versatility of digital technology.